

ELIZABETH BISHOP
THE DIGNITY OF WRITING

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PREFACE

This book takes the outward form of a study of the American poet Elizabeth Bishop. In particular, it is concerned to analyze the stylistic qualities of her writing, while at the same time showing the underlying political significance of this style, or range of styles. My initial point of departure is to view her earlier work as in some ways related to the tradition of allegory very broadly defined. Here my discussion is indebted to Benjamin; following this I trace her gradual movement toward a more realistic style. The purpose is to show her taking account of the world in all its complexity, starting with the alienation of the self in what is perceived a hostile political environment (the US) and then moving toward a fuller and more gratifying perception of the world in a new place, the foreign land of Brazil. Here we pay attention to her encounter with the otherness of this foreign culture and people. A gradual communalist, perhaps even somewhat Marxist orientation overtakes her work, though this impulse remains at the level of subtext. In the penultimate phase of her writing she returns to reflect on her native land, but this time in an increasingly satirical mode in which its culture, and especially its governmental regime, are sharply, though obliquely, criticized. In fact, we realize at this point that she is indeed a permanent and profound dissident.

In the last phase we see her encounter with the isolation of coming mortality. Beyond this, however, we discuss the more theoretical question arising from the dialectic that we had been tracing in her work all along, using it as a sort of heuristic device -- that

of the contrast between allegory and description (I sometimes call it mimesis or at other times the micrology of description).

Throughout, the work exhibits what we might think of as a somewhat Marxist theoretical frame, drawn especially from Bloch and the Benjamin already mentioned. There is an implicit criticism of deconstruction sketched in the long and rather abstract conclusion, a conclusion which is actually the theoretical heart of the work and which requires a separate synopsis in itself. Here we attempt to define more clearly both the dialectic of allegory and description and that phrase invoked at the very outset of the study -- the dignity of writing. We contend that a primordial ambiguity of representation consists in an ongoing conflict of two powers resident in the mind -- what we call allegory on the one hand and mimesis on the other. This ambiguity is connected to the ambiguity of substance itself -- that it is both oppressive and nourishing. Mimesis is a response, an indication of a desire to draw near and to embrace; allegory an indication of aversion, or of a desire to transcend. This is the ambivalence at the heart of writing, though it is there only because it is first at the heart of existence. Writing is in the first instance the mediation of this conflict. There is never a purely allegorical work nor a purely descriptive one; it is rather a question of combining and balancing these modes against each other, each successful work achieving its own special *concordia discors*. The dignity of writing is seen in writing's power to encode, in a determinate way, this ambiguity of substance through varying styles of description and this ambivalence *toward* substance through intellectual comprehension as such. It consists, further, in the fact that writing embodies the chiasmus -- as Merleau-Ponty might call it -- of nature (since language is a natural endowment) and sociality, nature and culture, and remains

always an affair of both impulse and convention -- hence its issuing from and encoding of the entire range of human mentality, as this mentality is seized by, riven by, the ambivalence and conflict we have described (or allegorized (which?)).¹ Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it consists in the fact that in the work of a significant author, writing is the evidence of a process of learning -- it is inscription, yes, but not of empty signs merely, which attain a semblance of meaning purely by means of their diacritical distinctions; rather, it is the manifold sign of this embodied comprehension, this ambivalence itself, for without it we would have not writing but nonsense. It impresses itself upon us as the evidence of a path of experiencing, of questioning, learning, suffering, hope and fear together -- learning in the broadest sense and deepest acceptance. This implies, at the farthest reach of learning, the farthest reach likewise of experience, which is historical experience, and of questioning, which is likewise historical questioning; and this impels the writer, necessarily an individual, to historical self-placement, which can only be expressed in the act of writing for others (since only this act can be historical in the fullest sense). Yet in this very act is perceived sharply the conflict between allegory and mimesis, typification and the micrology of description, summary and detailed analysis, justice and mercy.² At the same time it is a finite and particular creature that undergoes this process, a creature whose existence is darkened and troubled by the imperative to write. What is the way to address oneself to the others whom one *must* address and, as it were, posthumously? Neo-classical ideas of decorum are an attempt to manage this problem, perhaps the deepest one for the writer, once the technical matters of representation have been decided. There the solution is to remain a person speaking to other persons, moving neither above them nor below them on the

chain of being. But it may be that this is hard for the modern writer, since so many impulses in modern culture encourage both descent or ascent, as the case may be. For instance, in "Night City [*Complete Poems* 167] even when literally aloft she yet remains grounded in an awareness of limitation, fragility, trouble, and exiguous hope. These are the constituents, in this instance, of her civilized and humane voice; in other cases it has other implications and suggestions, yet it is always the sign of a particular kind of humility -- since however brilliant writing may become, it is never anything other than the words of one individual, one finite person, undergoing discovery, transformation, wonder and trauma. The dignity of writing is therefore the primary means open to the writer *as writer* of achieving the redemption of desire by which it transcends the mere individual -- their person, their nervous system, quite literally. Here, we see instead the factors that redeem desire -- a much degraded term, after all: they are first, that it not quit or renounce itself, nor even weaken over time: resignation is the first sign and entrance of corruption, and to avoid it is itself a major achievement; secondly, it must be the vehicle for a continuing perception of the world, and not for merely various types of enjoyment or consumption; and finally, it must acknowledge the presence of the others and address them, too, in some way.

To border on the polemical, it seems to us that too many post-modern writers fail to achieve this redemption of desire, in the sense that they remain within the realm of stylistic choices merely. Yet we contend, and will try to show in close readings, that the author was seized by the manifold imperatives of the world, which implies a properly receptive human nature to begin with, and means then attending to the signs by which the world solicits one; we further contend that though these signs are nothing in themselves,

they become significant in the process of a work of learning, a process of inquiry, a kind of trial. The mistake of deconstruction is the mistake of semiotics and structuralisms themselves -- to pay attention to the system of signs (language or what have you) and to forget the specific act that makes the sign a sign to begin with -- which is an act of *learning*. And learning is by definition always instantiated in an individual. We propose here and follow a particular -- though by no means unique approach -- which places the fact of style first -- defined as specific idiosyncratic mark, way, form -- and proceeds to question the nature of the perception and understanding that this, in its broadest sense, stands as evidence of. Of course, pinning the style to some event in the "life," or vice versa, is never the point; we reject biography and its amateur detection. We assume merely that a saying is weighted with an existential sincerity: the expressive mark expresses something. But though this is true it is more importantly the case that humans are fundamentally learning creatures -- labile, fragile, in transition continually -- and so we ask not so much what the author expresses as how the world is changing the author, and changing *through* the author, *as* author, that is: what is she learning, what does this writing, taken as evidence, give evidence of? We seek a dynamism in the total form of the work (the entire *Complete Poems*) and seek, too, its image of ultimate fate. This fate is one of profound isolation, finally, and perhaps inevitably, though only in part because of the isolation that attends mortality and aging. More importantly it is because of an intuitive sense that human mentality (at least as expressed in language) consists of these opposed powers -- the micrology of description (a relatively modern power) and allegory (an ancient one). Yet one's selfhood, as it weighs upon one in aging, cannot be adequately conveyed by either means.

It is not a Marxist analysis in any usual sense of the term, therefore, that we offer, and we do not claim that Bishop is a Marxist writer in the usual sense. But she achieves similar insights at an even deeper level by going about them in her own way, a way fundamentally aesthetic, impressionistic, perceptual. She discovers the historical and social as the ultimate horizons for understanding human society and becomes fundamentally Marxist in this sense. Yet a mysterious something remains unspoken, and it is by this means that she evades the allegories of Marxism itself (as likewise of psychoanalysis). She therefore, without in the least trying, renews the possibilities of Marxist aesthetics for our post-modern time and disproves the lie of the end of Marxism, socialism, history, or what have you that was so common for a while.

In order to follow the nature of her perceptions and the way these change and then the specific ways they are captured in the minutia of a style which itself undergoes profound changes, I thought it best to structure the book as a series of close readings. The pace of these is sometimes rather brisk, yet it is only in this way that the grain and specificity of her practice can be clearly seen and distinctly heard, and it is only by keeping up this pace that the entire shape of her itinerary can emerge. Still, like islands, or oases, or mirages, there are summaries planted here and there and then, as I have mentioned, a long and elaborate theoretical conclusion making reference to Bloch, Alphonso Lingis, Levinas, Derrida and others. Perhaps it might be thought that here, at last, thefts, or at any rate distortions, are obliquely acknowledged, and so in some sense rectified: and yet it can never be so, for a condensation of idiom, characteristic of the entire book, and perhaps wearily so, is needed to push the mind, like a tunneling and yet playful child, through the accumulating snows of historical time.

NOTES

1. See “The Chiasm,” in *Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings*. Thomas Baldwin ed. London: Routledge, p.247-271.
2. Here I use the term justice to denote a rather imperious Law and mercy to allude to that French expression “to know all is to forgive all.”

PART ONE

INTRODUCTION QUESTIONS OF STYLE

One is haunted by style in reading Elizabeth Bishop, by images that arrest the attention, and by descriptions that attempt to replace painting itself as a means of visual culture. Stylistic considerations intrude themselves upon the reader. Perhaps to call it style is limiting; it is above all a way of seeing, a way of reading and of interpreting the world. And then it is the establishment in the reader's mind of a presence, of a person who does this. What *is* this way of seeing? And how should we characterize it? In the first instance we must observe that many other critics have been struck by this style; yet their investigations have repeatedly seemed to remain within a rather narrowly delimited boundary, because they were so taken by this purely aesthetic aspect. They tended to stop where they should have pushed on to ask of the significance of these images, these rhythms, in fact, the import of this body of work as a whole. Here, I believe, we find the criticism in general less than satisfactory and marked by a certain superficiality. In contrast to this there has been an opposite tendency, one which places the emphasis largely on the poet's life history, sometimes attempting to match poem with biographical incident. Yet this too seems unsatisfactory in that it gives the writing itself as specific work of art too little attention. In some ways, the criticism of this poet reminds one of the situation that obtained with the work of Frost twenty or thirty years ago -- there is an "ooohing and ahing" over various stylistic effects, a rather cursory attempt at

interpretation, and then a hasty leap to the biographical. Yet the poet's specifically poetic artistry deserves better than this, and so for that matter do various specific sub-texts -- or a related group of them -- working through her poetry as a whole which unifies it and makes it more than a collection of 100 exquisite lyrics.

Certainly there are many themes we associate with her. We find, for instance, a preoccupation with travel, with what we might even call (borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari) the line of flight, insofar as travel is not merely a pastime but the fulfillment of deep needs; we find also the idea of the good place, not a utopia certainly, but an alternative society that represents a cultural alternative. For her it was a southern place -- Brazil -- seen as a kind of escape from a northern culture perceived as oppressive. Then too, there is the theme of that northern culture itself -- the United States -- and the attempt to understand it and to describe its way of life. And yet this society, this culture, its issues and its alternatives, did not come into existence by divine fiat, but through a complex of historical processes. And so the theme of history is prominent in her work as well, though, like all these others, it is sometimes approached in oblique ways. The writer has entrance to her various subjects by means of side doors and odd approaches continually, and this calls for an analogous response from her readers. There is finally one further theme -- that of beauty or, rather, of the visual itself. Perhaps this is not a theme exactly, but the author is, in the very substance of her writing, so strongly oriented to the experience of the eye that it is impossible to discuss her work without paying attention to the ways she attempts to address this range of experience. But here, with this preoccupation, we return to our initial point of entrance -- style. How is it that she uses language to portray the world, to depict its light, its movement, and its color? Finally, is there a way to link all of these

issues together at some deeper level, so that the writing might be seen as the expression of a single underlying intention—esthetic, ideological, philosophical? This would be the ultimate goal of the present study.

And yet the issue of style is always uppermost. With it comes the question of form, always a preoccupation among the Anglophone poets of her time. Actually, in her case, as daring as her descriptions are, we find a relationship to poetic form which is conservative on the whole, though it does exhibit tendencies toward subtle innovation here and there as well as a love of elegant finish. Yet the formal qualities of her work do not seem to derive from a desire for experimentation nor, on the other hand, for conservation but instead seem to be arrived at pragmatically. Such issues are not a productive way to approach this writer's work. What is important is something else. And yet what is style?

It is a term that does mean something, though what it denotes tends to expand, letting the demarcations in which we had contained it drift into other realms. Insofar as it is involved in her whole effort to describe the world in unusual ways, insofar as it *is* that effort, we can see it as the door by which we enter other questions and other issues -- her attitude toward her own society, for example, her position in the context of the history she confronted -- the Korean War, the developing militarism of the post-war years of repression known as the McCarthy era, perhaps even the developing Civil Rights movement. Are these things one associates with her? These are essentially the subject of Camille Roman's *Elizabeth Bishop's World II—Cold War View*. And I believe that she does show that Bishop was aware of the political forces in which she was situated. In addition, Thomas Travisano in his *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Artistic Development* had

already provided the pattern to be followed by numerous critics to come, including myself, when he sees her poetic development as proceeding from hermetic lyrics, a phase which he calls “Prison,” moving then through the “Middle Phase,” as he terms it, of “Travel” to finally arrive at the later phase of “History.” Indeed I believe that the two main points these scholars make --- first, that Bishop had an on-going awareness of the dire political events among which she lived and, second, that this fact influenced the overall shape of her work -- are sufficiently clear, so that no one would want to contest them. The general tone and tenor of her poetry have been appreciated and its itinerary marked out. But there is always something to be said for confusion, or at least said against so much clarity. My purpose is therefore to muddy the waters with the best solvent I know for over-clarified art – close reading. Finally I do believe that she comes to use her style to express her quite intense dissent from the realities of the American regime as a whole. I perhaps end up emphasizing her dissidence (which itself may take many forms) more than do any of her other critics. To criticize the critic is seldom fruitful, and so I have not tried to pick any quarrels, but merely to add my own voice of wonder, praise, and, alas, explication. But it is her growing dissent against the American Leviathan that I am chiefly concerned with.

It is a paradox: a writer whose work had been thought largely apolitical, and usually discussed in purely aesthetic terms, reveals herself to be, by that very aesthetic means -- style -- profoundly political. To understand how this might be, and to see the ways in which the disparate impulses of her poetry are expressions of a single impulse, we will need to search for a deeper concept than any she might herself be comfortable with. We will not find it, however, by looking only at the surface of the work or by

cursory glances. We will not find it because it is dispersed amid the totality of the poetry as a whole, which by definition we cannot represent, but which we can negotiate in some tentative fashion, examining what is presented on the page, yet then thinking beyond that to grasp the underlying motives of which the writing itself is an evidence. Yet there is a muteness and a secrecy always to the writing, even though it calls forth other writing in its very brilliance, and even though there is a speaking voice in it which seems to address us in a way both distinctive as well as elusive and reticent. We present here, in these notes, a record of one such exploration, the calling of writing, silent in its figures, to one reader, in a given time and place.

SUGGESTIONS OF THE ALLEGORICAL

We find the beginning of our investigation far from the author's own work, actually, in Walter Benjamin's ideas about allegory as he develops them in his enigmatic study *The Origins of the German Tragic Drama*. In making this connection, we must bear in mind that he was looking at vastly different material, yet it may be that his critical perspective is not so far removed from our topic. His specific problem too was stylistic: in the works he examined he noticed a degree of high stylization, which yet co-existed with a subtle realism in certain respects, and which did not seem graspable by means of the concept of allegory as it had been usually understood till then, though yet it seemed in many ways to call for it. In addition, he intuited behind this special style -- that of the German Baroque anti-court drama -- a range of psychological, political, and religious

motivations, and his revisionary efforts were directed toward showing the necessity of just this style, with all its incongruities and excesses, for doing justice to these issues. Of course, Benjamin's analysis has set the terms for much contemporary discussion of allegory. In a recent study of the entire tradition of allegorical presentation in both literature and art the American scholar Theresa Kelley summarizes Benjamin's fundamental contentions:

Benjamin works out three related claims about allegory that have strongly influenced postmodern critical theory: it is the shared domain of fragment and ruin; it is caught up in time such that its meaning and signs are always marked by time passing; and it is either a hidden, redemptive agent in the onslaught of material and figural decay that is modern culture or the desiccated sign of this decay. [251]

We do not find in Elizabeth Bishop a tendency toward fragmentation. Yet the second and third characteristics Kelley mentions are relevant. For despite the formality of her work and its stylistic closeness to high modernism, it takes account of the historical in complex ways, as opposed to denying them through the creation of a supposedly autotelic form removed from the social context. She creates a poetry marked by the passing of time, a poetry of objects that exude time even if they are not clocks, often representing the passage of time for the individual, yet in addition also marking the movements of historical existence in the social world, though she does this most often in oblique ways. And yet they must be oblique, for in its conspicuous pursuit of the aesthetic -- the beautiful, the painterly -- the work distances itself from overt political dissent or even from what we might call sociological observation, though both of these, and especially the latter, slip in all over the place. This is the peculiar tension that I find in her writing,

in fact: a desire to say what must be said in a given historical moment, a desire to speak to that moment, to speak of it and to describe it, and yet also a desire to create an image of the fulfillment of desire itself, something which would rise above these constricted and mundane problems, these dismal circumstances of our everyday life, and present us with an image of happiness, quite simply. In this connection we might recall some remarks by J. Hillis Miller:

Allegory – the word means to speak figuratively, or to speak in other terms, or to speak of other things in public, from the Greek *allegorein*, *allos*, other, plus *agoreuein*, to speak (in public), from *agora*, an assembly, but also the marketplace or customary place of assembly....The word *allegory* always implies not only the use of figures, but a making public, available to profane ears, of something which otherwise would remain secret. [356]

Yet if the author had a deep discomfort -- as I believe she did -- with the society she was born into, why *not* adopt modes of explicit social dissent? Why must speech in the marketplace be coded? Perhaps the answer is that to do so would be to lose something especially important for her. As we have suggested, we might call this, quite simply, beauty, or perhaps, the utopian promise. For this reason, Brechtian political statement, for example, would be counterproductive for her as being too bald and direct and too exclusively determined by the social issues it addresses. Whereas she wishes to take into account both the reality of the social world and the inspiration she feels within herself, both the need for a responsible witnessing and the desire which does not merely witness but actively moves toward something greater, toward the Good itself, both truth and beauty. In simplest terms we could say that an allegorical style results from this combination of unease with an extant political order and a desire for an *elsewhere*; yet it

is this desire which gives the work a redemptive quality and keeps it from being yet another desiccated sign.

What is sought and hoped for is often quite radical: it is nothing less than a different relationship to life, to others, and to the natural world. She is a peripheral observer of her society, from which she was often absent, and yet she seems to encode, in her elegant stanzas, implied criticisms of it which are nonetheless profound. Perhaps we might think of her as, in a way, the utopian realist, the secretive and elusive outsider made so not by social marginality, but by an unshakeable perception that the society which seemed so ready to shower awards on her was itself an order of injustice and concealed within its structures repressive forces tending to militate against any real enjoyment or creativity, still less any real equality between people (and I believe that she cared very much about this last, as much as anything). Indeed in its total organization it might have seemed to her an ongoing state of war, beyond even what passing emergencies -- such as the Second World War itself -- might have suggested. Camille Roman's useful book *Elizabeth Bishop's World War II—Cold War View* provides a detailed portrait of the author's concrete experiences as she watched the United States being turned more and more into a military state. Yet the police violence depicted in Edmund Wilson's *The Thirties* must also have had its effect on the sensitive girl. Yet the writer's temperament -- reflective, prone to a lingering melancholy, and too intelligent to tolerate exaggerations or to draw undue personal attention to herself -- required an oblique and mediated approach to dissent. She is an observer, primarily; a reclusive witness who in her circumspection preferred to inhabit the edges of the political regime in question, hiding out in Nova Scotia, in Brazil, or in Europe. Indeed, she does not have a

specific political agenda and does not attempt to forward a political vision of any discernible kind, yet her sensibility responds to the realities presented to her in such a way that she expresses a kind of total criticism of the underlying values of the culture she was herself part of. Allegory is not, in any exact way, the term for what she does, yet her writing borrows from this mode, using it in order to combine it with a more subtle realism, as well as with the surreal fancifulness for which she is also noted. Yet the idea of allegory can serve, nonetheless, as an entrance to her work, since it focuses the problem of the conflict between directness (or the need for it) and indirectness (and the desire for it), between statement and style. For this reason we should begin by examining this sometimes neglected artistic approach itself -- allegory, the coded speech of the marketplace -- as well as some prominent contemporary uses of it.

THE NATURE AND USES OF ALLEGORY

The characteristics of this special approach are sometimes difficult to define. George Steiner in the preface to a 1977 translation of Benjamin's *Origins of the German Tragic Drama* provides a useful summary of what I feel is most relevant in Benjamin's discussion.

The *Ursprung* closes with an almost mystically-intense apprehension of the ubiquity of evil in baroque sensibility. It suggests...that only allegory, in that it makes substance totally significant, totally representative of ulterior meanings and, therefore, unreal in itself, can render bearable an authentic perception of the infernal. [20]

Benjamin himself quotes Novalis at one point on the question of allegorical style. It is a remarkably impressionistic statement on Novalis' part, yet it bears repeating:

It is...remarkable that Novalis...shows a profound understanding of the essence of allegory in the few passages in which he touches on the subject. ... '...A certain archaism of style, a correct disposition and ordering of masses, a faint hint of allegory, a certain strangeness, respect, and bewilderment which shimmer through the writing --these are some of the essential features of this art.' [187]

Such perceptions are Benjamin's tools for creating, point by point, a corrective to the more traditional view of allegory in which it was seen as a means of illustrating abstract ideas. He considered such assumptions to be remnants of a theology in the sense that they saw the symbol as somehow closer, in some quasi-natural, quasi-mystical sense, to the transcendent order of the divine. The symbol is such that a light from a higher order -- perhaps God, perhaps nature seen in some divine sense -- gleams through it. Allegory by contrast lacks this special affinity with what it ultimately must try to represent, this same transcendent order; it is instead a contrived and artificial mode, and though useful, must be considered a lower type of expression. We know that not only did a theological bias -- which naturally asserted an inherent connection between scriptural figures and divine mysteries --- affect them but even more so the views of Goethe, of whom Benjamin is obviously aware, and in whom he saw the same bias, though operating for different and more complex reasons. What were those reasons? The question naturally lies outside the scope of our present work, and yet not entirely, and I hope to return to the issue of allegory later, since it is an issue which has threaded itself continually through the history of modern aesthetics. In any event, one installment in this complex history is focused for us by Benjamin himself -- it is perhaps his very first critical discovery -- and formulated, in a sort of shorthand, albeit a verbose one, as the reason for the 19th century's typical

contrast between the symbolic and the allegorical (in which the symbolic is always preferred). Benjamin's exposition borders on the satirical when he approaches this subject:

For over a hundred years the philosophy of art has been subject to the tyranny of a usurper who came to power in the chaos which followed in the wake of romanticism. The striving on the part of the romantic aestheticians after a resplendent but ultimately non-committal knowledge of an absolute has secured a place in the most elementary theoretical debates about art for a notion of the symbol which has nothing more than the name in common with the genuine notion. This latter, which is the one used in the field of theology, could never have shed that sentimental twilight over the philosophy of beauty which has become more and more impenetrable since the end of early romanticism. But it is precisely this illegitimate talk of the symbolic which permits the examination of every artistic form 'in depth', and has an immeasurably comforting effect on the practice of investigation into the arts. The most remarkable thing about the popular use of the term is that a concept which, as it were categorically, insists on the indivisible unity of form and content, should nevertheless serve the philosophical extenuation of that impotence which, because of the absence of dialectical rigour, fails to do justice to content in formal analysis and to form in the aesthetics of content. For this abuse occurs wherever in the work of art the 'manifestation' of an 'idea' is declared a symbol. The unity of the material and the transcendental object, which constitutes the paradox of the theological symbol, is distorted into a relationship between appearance and essence. The introduction of this distorted conception of the symbol into aesthetics was a romantic and destructive extravagance which preceded the desolation of modern art criticism. As symbolic construct, the beautiful is supposed to merge with the divine in an unbroken whole. [160]

The Romantic symbol, then, is also thought to have a kind of natural relationship with what it expresses. This assumption, in Benjamin's view, weakens the analysis of works' formal characteristics and limits the understanding of their intellectual content. Of course, the assumption that artistic signs can be made transparent to a transcendental signified would have been especially inapplicable to the radically "fallen" world represented in the baroque court plays Benjamin investigates. Yet this pessimistic world of the baroque,

darkened with sinister shadows, rent by fissures separating will and act, as likewise good and the means of good, and cluttered with the desiccated signs of temporality, is nothing but our modern world. Hence Benjamin's desire to rehabilitate this aesthetic is understandable, for he saw it as a key to a certain portion of modern art. Moreover, it is especially suited to the expression of dissent, though this dissent may be so coded and so general as to assume the outlines of the theological (or perhaps the gnostic). *This entire order must be changed*, it seems to say. Yet there is a skepticism in these works as well, for allegory, as he understands it, does not assume a natural efficacy of figures or a natural receptivity on the part of audience or viewer. It rather attempts to *construct* both, the first through its artifice, the second by the interpretive process this is intended to prompt.

Benjamin's efforts at fostering an appreciation of such an aesthetic were quite successful (eventually). But the aesthetic he was expounding, though influential at last, still runs counter to many prominent trends in modern literature. We are aware of the connection between Symbolism and Surrealism and the high Romantic attitudes that Benjamin criticizes. These early 20th century movements exhibited their own assumptions about the special power of certain kinds of figuration to express hidden dimensions of reality. Two instances we might point to are the tendency toward mythical motifs as a way of reaching communal, transhistorical domains of significance, an approach found in many modern writers and in a sense codified in Jung, or, in another context, the basic Surrealist assumption that dreams give a special access to what is beyond our normal reality, a gnosis. Such would be two instances of persistent Romantic tendencies in modern aesthetics, tendencies which help to foster an overall climate of sensibility which

is quite different from one that would be appreciative of allegory as a potential mode of modern expression.

Another common point of resistance would be that habit of thinking that we might call the flight from time, the high modernist idea of creating, through the forms of art, a resistance to the temporal and especially the historical: T.S. Eliot's Chinese jar which moves perpetually in its stillness, for example; but beyond that the simple idea of the aesthetic as a realm apart from the social transformations that we know as history. Art and literature are thought to have their own distinct history, or else to be part of an ahistorical domain whose elements -- plots, motifs, characters, styles and conventions -- are recycled according to their own trends that stand apart from the forces shaping social life itself. This has been a particular target of Marxist aesthetic theories, especially in what we might call their more classical formulations --Trotsky, Lukacs -- and in fact in many Left leaning populist aesthetics of the thirties.¹ The authors in these movements and the critics explicating them, were at pains to show that literature could not be seen as in any way separated from its social context and function. But these trends also carried with them their own problems, for the tendency was to go to an opposite extreme, to drive literary expression entirely into the social sphere, with little left over for beauty, mystery, secrecy, and thoughts not readily apprehended by a common reader in a relatively brief time. We might think of such trends as a *communicationalist* approach, which took, and still takes, the form of various plain styles and pared down realisms.

In surveying all of this, one might sometimes feel that the first aesthetic -- Romantic, Symbolist, Surrealist -- proceeds too much under the aegis of Nature, whose power it arrogates to itself by means of pictorial description and, if that fails, the Dream,

while the second approach -- Socialist Realism, Working Class Realism, Brechtian-the-donkey-must-understand-it-too-ism 2 -- proceeds too much under the demands of a myth of social concern. Whereas, in contrast to both of these, the allegorical, as Benjamin tells us, arises out of “a strange combination of nature and history.” [167] It is only by such a fusion that substance becomes totally significant of ulterior meaning, to paraphrase Steiner. Yet it is not a question of creating a simple dialectic of plain and fancy. Benjamin points out that the Baroque allegory was “devoted neither to the earthly nor moral happiness of creatures, its exclusive aim is their mysterious instruction.” [178] It was thus from the beginning an encrypted teaching from which the enigmatic was never excluded. And its expression could sometimes take the form of “a veritable eruption of images....” Benjamin’s analysis makes one realize that the allegorical impulse, even in the modern version we are trying to identify, must be seen as its own specific economy of conception and imagination. Its differences with more historically valued styles make it inevitable that it will often be viewed in contrast to them, yet it cannot be seen as a modification of something else, or of various things. It is its own mode with its own purposes, its own depths and enigmatic recesses and shadows.

Modern literature, however, is not divisible merely into the ornate and the plain, the symbolist and the realist. The constructivism inherent in various modernist experiments -- Surrealism among them -- produced a third way, and then a fourth: first, what we might think of as the disrupted style, the cubist arrangement of words, the collage-like assemblages and discontinuous modes associated with such varied figures as Apollinaire, Zukofsky, Pound, to a certain extent Celan; second, perhaps arising out of this, what we might call the self-reflexive, non-representational, or anti-representational

approach, which we might associate with the American LANGUAGE group, with Gertrude Stein, Robert Duncan's "Structure of Rhyme" sequence, perhaps with the late work of Gunter Eich. The origin of this style would actually be traced by some to Symbolism itself, specifically Mallarme. But whatever its source, we could see it as that mode by which the linguistic substance is liberated from its role as medium and becomes itself the object of presentation. These approaches too, I would suggest, are also incompatible with the encrypted teaching of allegory: they direct attention to themselves, to language itself, as we have noted, to the medium as medium and leave no room for that strange fusion of nature and history -- indeed they attempt at times to step out of both, and insofar as the linguistic medium itself is fore-grounded they leave no room also for the veritable eruptions of images.

Yet what is wrong with these various approaches? What would prompt a turning away from these more valued styles toward this other approach which we even find difficult to characterize?

It is perhaps not a question of style or of form, but rather one of achieving the types of meaning an individual feels pressing upon her (or him), perhaps in response to external factors, or a combination of external and internal, of political and personal. Because it takes certain aspects of substance, that is, of the phenomenal world, to be merely given, the Romantic approach and its descendents seems impoverished at a certain level; it subordinates itself to a mimesis. Yet the plain style will also not do, because it tends to subordinate figuration to mere communication. It refrains from creating figural complexity in the first place, and such complexity is the only possible vehicle for the meaning which seems to press from all sides and to demand recognition,

albeit a darkened one. And, as we have already said, the disrupted style and the reflexive language-oriented styles are, finally, too concerned with their own internal processes. The allegorical is always a representational mode, though it attempts to conceal the full significance of what it represents. It speaks in the market place, albeit cryptically; yet to speak there is to speak about something, and not merely about the manner of one's own speaking. There is an inherent *pointing beyond* in allegory, which yet cannot renounce a deliberate obscuring or coloring. This is perhaps a self-contradictory impulse, but it seems to be a recurrent one, a perennial recourse for artists of certain temperaments or for those working under certain conditions.

In this writer it is actually produced by a kind of hovering among or bordering upon all of these approaches to one degree or another (though I think the disruptive is least in evidence). One finds in particular a movement between the Romantic and the plain, the surrealist and the communicational. In Bishop the surrealist impulse takes the form of an extreme fancifulness with remarkable painterly qualities of color and visual imagery, a mode she draws from Anglo-American sources such as Coleridge's phantasmagoric style, with perhaps some influence of her own practice as an amateur painter. There is also an interplay between general language and a more detail-oriented expression. The result seems best interpreted in the terms that Benjamin provides: a figuration which must take account of evil and the fallen nature of the world but which can only do so in ways that are themselves oblique, since only this can have the desired weight of expression and do justice to the full enormity of what is intuited. This approach takes nothing for granted among its own devices, does not assume a natural link between itself and the truths it yet must strive to impart. In this sense the Romantic approach

assumes too much; and yet the communicational one does also, for it assumes the possibility of a direct expression which would never lose its way among the labyrinth of hearers, nor indeed among the labyrinth of power relations in the society it addresses. It assumes that what it imparts would never be contested by its audience *in ways to which it could not provide an implicit response*. It assumes not merely the transparency of its truth but underestimates the devious means by which its reception will be distorted and underestimates, also, the extent to which that society, already so sunk in corruption, has set up snares and devices in advance, the degree to which the publicizing of the truth had in fact already been long anticipated by the powers in question, which are thoroughly inured against it. The disrupted style and the reflexive style also succumb to a fatal naivete. For what is the purpose of communication in a time of emergency, plague, and warfare -- catastrophe -- if not to impart to others what they urgently need to know? The allegorical style assumes a meaningfulness in its figures and an importance in its meanings, and yet it attempts to give an ultimate significance to both by assuming nothing about the ease of communication or the good will of audiences, nor likewise anything about the efficacy of its own devices to allow the world, physical or metaphysical, to show through them as though by a natural light. In addition, it has no interest in showing the self-referentiality of sign systems through a performative demonstration. In the time of catastrophe, performances are of no interest. And yet the time of catastrophe is always.

Yet in addition to the melancholy reflectiveness I have already mentioned, we can also see in Bishop a deep distrust of despair and of the aesthetics of despair prominent among modern artists. Is it here that we see a dissent from modernism in the writer, and a

movement toward some other cultural orientation which yet we cannot characterize by the already outworn term post-modern. Perhaps this is the background for what I have been referring to as a utopian impulse, a craving for beauty, and for, quite simply, the moment of joy and of happiness.

To try to understand the allegorical mode better in its contemporary manifestations, we should look at one or two especially clear examples, before moving on to Bishop's work itself. These examples have also, I think, the advantage of being in many ways simpler than her own work tends to be; they are purer examples of the post-war use of allegorical tendencies in poetry and show somewhat less admixture of other styles that tend in her case to make things somewhat more complicated -- her painterliness, as it is often refereed to, the occasional surreal tendency, not least her humor and irony; these would be major complicating factors that pull her style, even at its most allegorically inclined, away from any simple version of that approach, to say nothing of those times when she becomes very much a realist. Yet it is the outline, the suggestion of allegory that we intend to look at in her work to begin with while at the same time taking account of the other elements which complicate it. From there I will try to track her movement away from this complex perhaps oddly assorted early style and toward what I would call the profound realism of her middle and later periods. In the process of tracking this change we hope also to show the way in which this author captured -- in the variety of styles she felt compelled to use -- one of the most profound accounts of the life, culture, and history of the north American regime through the crucial years of its international ascendancy, the so-called Pax Americana of the immediate post-war years to about the mid-60's. It seems to me that no other poet did as much, with such

penetration and originality, and all with a mastery such that almost no single poem is less than brilliant or less than essential. It seems to me that a dissent is present continually in the work; and though it is elaborately coded at first, it becomes gradually more overt. By virtue of this realism it encompasses more than just the dissent of an individual but becomes a means of revealing much broader patterns of experience in the society at large. But to begin with let us examine this allegorical mode, as we have called it, in two somewhat related instances: “Ausfahrt” (“Departure”) by the Austrian poet Ingeborg Bachmann and then Adrienne Rich’s well-known “Diving into the Wreck.” The fact that we include a foreign poet only indicates the use of this approach internationally in the post-war era as well as its persistence into the more strictly contemporary period, in the case of Adrienne Rich.

LEAVING WITHOUT TRAVEL

Ausfahrt

Vom Lande steigt Rauch auf.
Die kleine Fischerhütte behalt im Aug,
denn die Sonne wird sinken,
ehe du zehn Meilen zurückgelegt hast.

Das dunkle Wasser, tausendäugig,
schlägt die Wimper von weisser Gischt auf,
um dich anzusehen, gross und lang,
dreissig Tage lang.

Auch wenn das Schiff hart stampft,
und einen unsicheren Schritt tut,
steh ruhig auf Deck.

An den Tischen essen sie jetzt
 den geräucherten Fisch;
 dann werden die Männer hinknien
 und die Netze flicken
 aber nachts wird geschlafen,
 eine Stunde oder zwei Stunden,
 und ihre Hände werden weich sein,
 frei von Salz und Öl,
 weich wie das Brot des Traumes,
 von dem sie brechen.

Die erste Welle der Nacht schlägt ans Ufer,
 die zweite erreicht schon dich.
 Aber wenn du scharf hinüberschaust,
 kannst du den Baum noch sehen,
 der trotzig den Arm hebt
 - einen hat ihm der Wind schon abgeschlagen
 - und du denkst: wie lange noch,
 wie lange noch
 wird das krumme Holz den Wettern standhalten?
 Vom Land ist nichts mehr zu sehen.
 Du hättest dich mit einer Hand in die Sandbank krallen
 oder mit einer Locke an die Klippen heften sollen.

In die Muscheln blasend, gleiten die Ungeheuer des Meers
 auf die Rücken der Wellen, sie reiten und schlagen
 mit blanken Säbeln die Tage in Stücke, eine rote Spur
 bleibt im Wasser, dort legt dich der Schlaf hin,
 auf den Rest deiner Stunden,
 und dir schwinden die Sinne.

Da ist etwas mit den Tauen geschehen,
 man ruft dich, und du bist froh,
 dass man dich braucht. Das Beste
 ist die Arbeit auf den Schiffen,
 die weithin fahren,
 das Tauknüpfen, das Wasserschöpfen,
 das Wändedichten und das Hüten der Fracht.
 Das Beste ist, müde zu sein und am Abend
 hinzufallen. Das Beste ist, am Morgen,
 mit dem ersten Licht, hell zu werden,
 gegen den unverrückbaren Himmel zu stehen,
 der ungangbaren Wasser nicht zu achten,
 und das Schiff über die Wellen zu heben,
 auf das immerwiederkehrende Sonnenufer zu.[3]

Ingeborg Bachmann's poem "Ausfahrt" is appealing for a number of reasons, not the least of which is its comparative directness. The style is at times almost like that of a parable, with here and there more specific and striking details. We are moving elsewhere from the beginning, and yet we have no announced destination. We are simply going. In some respects it might seem like a rather American poem in its immediate emphasis on flight, movement, and departure. The shore is already distant, so that we cannot tell what the nature of this smoke is which rises from the huts: are they on fire, or were they ever? Are we leaving the devastated cities of Europe to go elsewhere? And if we are, in what direction are we going? It might, after all, be the reverse of an American poem, in so far as we identify the American with a myth of the west and of a movement westward. If we judge by the phrasing of the conclusion, however, we have the impression of a movement east, the direction of the morning and of the rising sun and, of course, also of the Soviet Union. Certainly "Sonnenufer" should be viewed as, from a literal and imagistic standpoint, the sun when it is low on the horizon, either rising or setting, creating sun-shores of light along the water. Because the poet mentions rising in the morning, we might be justified in picturing the ship moving toward the rising sun, and therefore east. Yet we recall a strange time compression that marks the poem's narrative throughout. After the lines "denn die Sonne wird sinken,/ ehe du zehn Meilen zuruckgelegt hast" we quickly seem to move hours ahead; it is evening and then, with no transition, night. If we assume the possibility of a similar time elapse between the phrase "...Das Beste ist, am Morgen..." and the conclusion, then we might think the poet envisions an entire day

passing in those few lines, which, after all, are filled with activity. If we do assume this, then the “Sonnenufer” would depict the sun as it is setting, and the ship would be headed west. It may seem like an insignificant point, and yet the poem as a whole is balanced neatly on a stylistic edge: wavering back and forth between rather abstract and generalizing presentation and something bordering on realism. In doing this, certain details are omitted, whereas others, carefully chosen, show up in prominent relief. The directional vagueness seems intentional; we are going, but our destination is not locatable on any map. We might be traveling either east or west, or perhaps in both directions at once. An ambiguity of style, hovering between the generality of fable and the detail of realism, is used to generate a more profound ambiguity. If we look at the very metaphor of “Sonnenufer” itself, we find, as though in miniature, an instance of this stylistic bordering. Is it a concrete image or a general one? Realistic or non-realistic? It seems describable in all four ways. In contrast to some of the preceding lines, it is keyed to a slightly higher stylistic register and that, combined with the fact that it is the last line, causes it to stand out from the rest of the poem. It is a salient image, a sign which arrests the flow of thought and of narration; it is an arrow pointing. But pointing where? As we have noted, it could refer to either sunrise or sunset. It cannot be said to *represent* either though; at most it conveys a smolder of light, which returns continually, and which is yet (like one of Calvino’s imaginary cities) always in the distance.

If we place the poem in its time frame (it dates from 1952, in other words the height of the Cold War) it is easy to see the potential significance of this directional motif. East and West represent opposed regimes, both of which are perhaps being rejected. Yet they also represent opposed concepts of life: should it be viewed as an affair

of the individual with his or her projects and desires? Or is it rather a collective enterprise? This conflict between individualism and collective participation seems to move like an undercurrent through the poem. The opening image of huts tends to suggest a collective life of some kind, and perhaps a rather primitive one. Yet there is an isolation to this single speaker from the outset, and this seems heightened by the first striking, non-realistic image we are given.

Das dunkle Wasser, tausendaugig.
Schlagt die Wimper von weisser Gischt auf,
Um dich anzusehen, gross und lang,
Dreissig Tage lang.

A gaze which suddenly regards her from the waves passing by fixes the speaker in her individuality. The image also contains the ideas of sequence and duration -- one mysterious eye after another opening wider and wider still -- a measuring of space and of time simultaneously, as well as a looking and watching: the shore moving further and further away, the journey lengthening, and even the gaze of these “eyes” opening wider as the rings of white foam expand and disperse. Perhaps it can be viewed as introducing the time elapse already mentioned, which by this point itself suggests a movement deeper into the journey, perhaps into the Irrevocable. This pushes the speaker further into herself: she realizes, with an element of anxiety, that she is on her own, or simply that she is who she is. It is easy to link these motifs to traditions of iconography which depict life as a voyage, yet there is an implicit paranoia as well in such an image. It is not merely the idea of being looked at, though of course that is part of it; it seems almost to suggest an idea of fate -- of powers elsewhere, and of an unknown kind, which are watching, observing.

Or is it rather that we know only too well the nature of these powers? For there is an implied *economics* in the image, that is to say, it suggests a regime of quantification, of measuring and counting, whether of time, distance, things, or indeed people. One is still being watched, even though the shore is far away: one is weighed and assessed, and one has only a specified future time -- 30 days. This figure itself, 30 days, is reminiscent of so many legal and financial contexts. Time is money, after all, and here distance seems to become time, or at least to have some effect on it. It is possible that we are moving away from the place of incessant counting, but do we thereby gain time? We seem actually to lose it, since things go so fast. Moreover, the time and the distance which might have seemed to promise a line of escape create an isolation, and within this isolation she perhaps finds that she herself has absorbed the mentality of counting and tallying. Thirty days, she reminds herself.

The isolation and anxiety of the protagonist is contrasted implicitly with the men themselves. They tend to their fishing nets, kneeling down, mending them. It is a posture of humbleness and utility, yet it is easy to see a glimmering of Christian motifs in it as well. They form a community such as the Apostles did, one devoted to humble labor and attentiveness. If the figure of men kneeling to mend nets begins to awaken this store of Christian iconography, then it is easy to see the fish as also a Christian motif. And yet of course it is a *smoked* fish, “den geraucherten Fisch.” This detail deflects the gathering Christian echoes, which yet still resonate, and prevents the poem from falling too neatly into a foreseeable category. It is not really a Christian poem, of course. Yet the suggestion is planted. At the same time, the detail functions in another, contrasting way: if it is a smoked fish, was this the smoke that was rising at the beginning? This one detail

creates the slight suggestion of another type of primitive community, not one of Christian solidarity but the peasant economics of fishing villages which do not fish for the purpose of wholesale trade on world markets but rather for basic subsistence. They eat (and smoke for preservation) what they catch. What kind of ship is this, after all? Is it a modern commercial fishing vessel or rather a smaller craft of the kind that might be found in the small Italian fishing villages the author was probably familiar with, a village itself perched on a border between the modern regime of neo-capitalism and older peasant economies? We cannot really say. These limiting details have been carefully omitted. We are given instead a kind of overlay of suggested types of communities which form, in a sense, strata of history: the first is the immediate post-war European situation with its devastation and its ensuing geo-political conflict of east vs. west; within that, like a glimmering light in dark water, the suggestion of the Christian myth, recalling not so much any specific Christian doctrine, still less any actual church, but rather the original ideal community cherished in the West, even if seldom practiced, and the values to which it was dedicated. It is as though one should reach back into time, far down into the depths of the past and draw forth this reminder of the idea of a community in which all are able to share. This idea is in fact developed further in the remainder of this stanza, where the poem takes on an incantatory rhythm that moves it entirely out of the realm of the actual (whether specific or general) and into the realm of dream, the utopian possible. Yet even here the realities of the men's actual existence show through -- stubborn and negative details which could not be omitted from the account. These are sailors still, not apostles, and they inhabit the actual world which imposes labor in economically determined forms: their hands are afflicted with the salt of the water and the oil of the gear that they use.

Nature and society both place physical burdens on them. Yet in the dream into which they sink, which the poet imagines for them, and in which she vicariously takes part, they touch upon an ideal. The bread that they break, the dream bread, is the Eucharistic moment of ideal reciprocity between self and other, as also between humans and the natural world, which here nourishes them without effort. Yet this reminds us that there is a third strata suggested, that of the primitive economies of subsistence we have already mentioned, an historical context in which humanity must struggle against basic scarcity and the elements of nature. These three orders -- modern capitalist, pre-modern subsistence, and the community of Christian myth mark out realms of concern that persist through all of history. They suggest questions of ethics, and of justice, and even perhaps an ecology. The question posed in all three areas is the same: how shall we (or I) live? The occasions for this questioning come at her, and at the reader, left and right.

For this reason, as we move into the middle section, a more psychological orientation comes forward. It is as if the isolation of the speaker is felt more strongly than ever now. There is a kind of panic reaction perhaps and a feeling of foreboding. The first wave of night, itself a telling phrase, is perceived as having struck the shore. Almost immediately, the speaker is overtaken by the second. The tree is still visible. Certainly this cannot be a tree on shore, which would seem to have been left behind long since. It could be the mast of the ship itself. One is reminded of the well-known phrase from Kant about the crooked timber of humanity from which nothing really straight can ever be made. Perhaps it is a chance echo, yet even so, there is the suggestion of ethical preoccupations hidden in the mere idea of fragility, of something holding out in a storm, a self-questioning which gives the poem a special gravity and an atmosphere of sincerity

-- not at all “sophisticated,” not at all ironic --and which distinguishes it from other literary representations of flight. If the poem *is* one of flight, it is a very sincere one, weighted with moral concern. We see that, in a way analogous to the shift in religious discourse which Deleuze sees in Kierkegaard and Peguy, where it is no longer a question of asking whether one should believe or not, but rather of making the manner of life lead by the believer the main concern, the question of this journey is not *where to go* but rather *how*. The answer seems to be very simple: perhaps it is too simple, yet it concludes the poem beautifully, inevitably. What other ending could it really have? The best thing is simply to work, to make yourself useful. There is perhaps a splendid anonymity, to use another Deleuzian phrase, in this conclusion. There is an absence of tricky psychology. All that really matters is making connections -- between oneself and others, and between the society one currently inhabits and a desirable possible future for that society. There is a splendid freshness and optimism in this conclusion, yet it is one which has to be tempered by lingering questions. We still do not know where we are going. Yet one thing does seem clear: the speaker dreams of a greater sense of community with others than seems possible in the societies she knows or knows of. And perhaps also she dreams of a greater freedom -- a freedom from encompassing economic calculation and from equally encompassing systems of measure, observation, and control, for only when one is free of these can one enjoy a relationship to others characterized by the directness and candor which these closing lines seem to imagine. Only then can one give a hand when a hand is needed, without ulterior motive or thought of compensation.

It would be easy to multiply examples, taking some from closer to home: many poems by Adrienne Rich, for example, show similar tendencies, and the well-known

“Diving into the Wreck” in particular has been repeatedly interpreted as an allegorizing sort of poem.³ Perhaps it is also not an accident that this has tended to be a mode found often in women’s writing -- where a deep discontent not with this or that specific issue but with an entire order or form of life animates the work, so that beyond any particular problem the author seeks to address this encompassing situation, the presuppositions out of which specific problems arise. The allegorical tendency, therefore, is somewhat distinct from the activist one. And in fact it is not characteristic of, say, Ginsberg, perhaps the greatest activist poet of the post-war years in the US. For the activist wishes to point and to pinpoint. He points a ray of relation, to borrow Emerson’s phrase, here and there to specific issues, specific crimes and injustices and then adjusts the opposite end of that ray so that it is trained on the reader’s face; the stylistic model of photography serves well, and though Ginsburg is surreal in “Howl,” he becomes photographic in *The Fall of America*, his underappreciated yet major work. Yet allegory does not aim merely at impact---the Brechtian ideal -- and certainly not success, the Brechtian *bete noir*; it aims, as Benjamin says, at our mysterious instruction. Is “Diving into the Wreck”, therefore, about the fate of our civilization, given its technological capacities? Is it an ecological poem perhaps? Is it really about gender relations? Or is it about historical awareness and research? Does it have to do with our relationship to our accumulated cultural past, perhaps even the artist’s relationship to the traditions of his or her art? Or is it about mortality, and the inheritances of personal destiny and fate? What, we want to know, *is* this wreck exactly, and who is the mysterious other who accompanies the speaker in her dive? Yet these are the subjects of mysterious instruction. To answer “all of the above”

will perhaps not do, but to think “some of the above” puts us on the road, the hermeneutic and heuristic path. 4

AGAINST ALLEGORY/ PAINTING IN WORDS

And yet we will not find a key to Bishop’s style in any one concept. Just as there is a moment that we might think of in terms of allegory -- a turning away from mimesis, a skewing of it, and a pointing beyond or elsewhere -- at other times there is an opposite impulse, an embrace of the world of appearance as it appears, an erotics of perception and an immersion in materiality, a loving, amused, attentiveness and perhaps a questioning as well. The questioning is largely concealed, however; it is implied in the surprising aptness of so many of her images and descriptions. This amused surprise is a characteristic effect of her style repeatedly. And it indicates a kind of questioning of the world of appearance that has, in a sense, taken place beneath the surface of the poem, in what we might imagine was the process that produced it (though of course we do not know the actual process). A questioning is most profound when it prompts a somewhat surprising answer, one that would be concealed from the superficial gaze. Yet I call the questioning implied, because it is not present in the mechanics of the poems themselves. This is the difference between her and much American modernism and in particular post-modernism, where many writers develop styles designed to act out the interrogation of appearance or of language in the poem’s very movement, in its incongruities, digressions,

and disjunctions. Bishop may be as surprised as they, but her sense of decorum never wavers.

Yet by a questioning we do not mean to indicate a particular rhetorical mode or a search for some particular type of knowledge; the questioning I have in mind is not oriented toward elucidating a defined problem or formulating a thesis. It is not a scientific endeavor any more than it is a rhetorical exercise. The best way to understand it is to consider some remarks on perception by Merleau-Ponty:

The thing as presented to sight (the moon's pale disc) or to touch (my skull as I can feel it when I touch it), and which stays the same for us through a series of experiences, is neither a *quale* genuinely subsisting, nor the notion of consciousness of such an objective property, but what is discovered or taken up by our gaze or our movement, a question to which these things provide a fully appropriate reply. The object which presents itself to the gaze or to the touch arouses a certain motor intention which aims not at the movements of one's own body, but at the thing itself from which they are, as it were, suspended. And in so far as my hand knows hardness and softness, and my gaze knows the moon's light, it is as a certain way of linking up with the phenomenon and communicating with it. Hardness and softness, roughness and smoothness, moonlight and sunlight, present themselves in our recollection, not pre-eminently as sensory contents, but as a certain kind of symbiosis, certain ways the outside has of invading us and certain ways we have of meeting this invasion...[*Basic Writings* 136]

The primacy of perception is thus a type of multifaceted questioning. Questioning, is an exploration of my self, of my own experience, and of my world, as also of my desires and fears, in their concrete manifestation, and with no preconceptions. What is sought is a greater possession, not *of* but *by* -- by the world, by chance perhaps and by the elements themselves, by reality in its broadest sense and in its deepest nature, as the individual human being is given to know it, drawing out of its manifold appearances something previously unknown and genuinely new -- the "now" that they themselves are, the event of reality, the event of the world, a point of the world in actual space/time. And yet this

truth, revealed here and now in the moment of insight to only this one, by virtue of her own attention, or indeed by chance, is accessible in its written form to anyone. Here we have a second paradox: the personal, the private, achieves a form of expression available to all, and this especially in view of the fact that the very independence of approach has brought about a distancing from more commonly adopted modes and styles, more commonly adopted ways of being modern, so many of which, by foregrounding that very questioning, produce a textual surface known for its difficulty, the quintessential modernist characteristic. Yet here, the opposite is seen, as in the case of Frost, for example, and certain others -- an independence of mind produces work *more* rather than less accessible. And yet the fundamental intention is a deeper penetration into the materiality of existence.

What is the attitude toward materiality itself? The answer is given in the fact, the experience of surprise -- a surprise of the author and of the reader both; hence her unusual images. The eye, vision, and by extension, the desire of the eye and of the self, splits from what it sees. In part the rupture indicates a fissure between self and society as well as self and object, though at first it is this latter that is emphasized. It is an alienation and yields an alienation effect, a seeing anew and from a distance. Then there is a uniting of eye and object in description, the careful tracking of mimesis. Here the model is painting and drawing -- a following of the eye and hand, a caressing of the object through the medium of light, as we see it exquisitely described by Merleau-Ponty in his classic essay "Eye and Mind" a modification of writing toward mimetic gesture, a making-like, a searching for an analogical moment and movement, inquiry seeking resemblance, correspondence, and doing so throughout the entire range of the observable, and not

merely in the most typically observed and salient features, almost for its own sake, in an almost tactile search that reaches outward for its hand-holds, its comparisons, through the observable world:

QUAI d'ORLEANS

Each barge on the river easily tows
 a mighty wake,
 a giant oak-leaf of gray lights
 on duller gray;
 and behind it real leaves are floating by,
 down to the sea.
 Mercury-veins on the giant leaves,
 the ripples, make
 for the sides of the quai, to distinguish themselves
 against the walls
 as softly as falling stars come to their ends
 at a point in the sky.
 And throngs of small leaves, real leaves, trailing them,
 go drifting by
 to disappear as modestly, down the sea's
 dissolving halls.
 We stand as still as stones to watch
 the leaves and ripples
 while light and nervous water hold
 their interview.
 "If what we see could forget us half as easily,"
 I want to tell you,
 "as it does itself – but for life we'll not be rid
 of the leaves' fossils."

[*Collected Poems* 28]

The wake of a ship is like a leaf. And yet this comparison is only the first step in a more careful discrimination -- ripples are events, yet also colors, all the one color actually but discriminated by degrees of light, by a tone, a luminescence. A further comparison -- with liquid metal, mercury -- captures motion, reflections, an inherent luminescence, but

also weight and the tendency to ripple and slow down in a certain way. In any event, luminescence implies being a light source (though not a burning, for here everything is cool, both chromatically and from what we know, through common sense, of the weather -- it is autumn after all). And so there is an extinguishing, a kind of melting away into undifferentiated “walls”. Lorrie Goldensohn speaks of an inward turning of the poem’s movement and its dizzying effect.[103] In these ways, the reality of the scene is portrayed in its sensuous minutia, not in order to make it pretty -- the purpose of such writing is sometimes misunderstood to the point where it is dismissed as preciousity – but it is in order to give an inclusive account, one beyond mere reporting, to achieve a three dimensional description that seeks an ultimate realness. Perhaps such a goal is a chimera, perhaps it is denied to mere words; yet this is the intention. To pursue this, a more than photographic noting of detail is needed, a kind of entrance by the senses into the materiality of the world. This can come about only through the observed detail and then through that crossing of one sense, one impression, with another, building up not so much discrete details but dimensions, aspects of the real: here the action of water, the action of light on water, a simultaneous slowness and quickness of natural events, as some things linger in long tracks and others disappear more quickly. There is trace and evanescence at the same time and an encompassing coolness and chill. Far from being oriented toward the pretty and the decorative, there is a death wish hidden here. Jacqueline Vaught

Brogan puts it as follows:

In the simplest terms...“Quai d’Orleans” is rather obviously concerned with linguistic representation and its groundless relation to human consciousness. Ruthlessly, for all its modest tone, this poem exposes the apparently unavoidable projection of human consciousness onto nature as an imprisoning act...[177]

The critic then goes on to list the numerous visual comparisons that are made in the course of the poem. But what is so ruthless about describing the ship's wake as analogous to a "a giant oak-leaf of gray lights/ on duller gray?" [178] She says further that..."The imaged "giant leaves" rapidly take on more anthropomorphic terms, "Mercury-veins of ripples evoking a rather gruesome analogy to the human hand." [178] Perhaps she overdoes things a bit. Beauty is present, after, all; and yet there is something uncanny about the poem certainly. The misery of existence combines and clashes with the ecstasy of sight and with that deeper perception that is led forward by sight, of which sight is but the first moment. There follows the kinesthetic dimension of imagined movement through intuited depths -- leaves falling through halls of water in no specific direction but simply "downward" into depth, here clearly the equivalent of death, perhaps also of illness, fatigue, ultimately of oblivion. How one longs to be forgotten by the world! To simply vanish from it instantly, effortlessly! Yet given one's tenacious life, this cannot happen so easily; "It is so dull and gruesome how we die" her friend Robert Lowell would write in a late poem. In fact, the traces of the world reach into one's very depths, entering through one's eyes and one's other senses, shaping one, becoming one at a certain level. Even if we do die, we are not free of the world even then.

Therefore, these almost uncharacterizable memory traces inform later perception in a complex process of exploration by means of perception and its normalizations in language. Do we not see a variant of that spreading oak leaf/wake in the sideways spread of reflections in this passage?

This celestial seascape, with white herons got up as angels,
flying as high as they want and as far as they want sideways

in tiers and tiers of immaculate reflections....
 The whole region, from the highest heron
 Down to the weightless mangrove island
 With bright green leaves edged neatly with bird droppings
 Like illumination in silver,
 And down to the suggestively Gothic arches of the mangrove roots...

[“Seascape”][40]

And see also, in this same passage, a variant of the downward falls that the leaves fell through, here the downward placement of the mangrove island, which seems yet to exist in a different atmosphere and emotional key. The process we illustrate here continues throughout the poetry, indeed throughout anyone’s life, in a complex crossing of perception and memory and of various senses brought to bear upon the same object or event, rendering it in a multi-dimensional fashion. This is indeed the most fundamental means we have of exploring the world and of testing the reality of our perceptions in it, since we are in fact always in it, as a fish in water, and can have no way of stepping out of it to verify the validity of any given perception by some Archimedean point. One perception can only be checked by means of another -- percept checked against memory against further percept simultaneously and diachronically and across the various faculties in question -- eye crossing with ear or with kinesthetic sense and so forth. Traditionally the term for this last aspect is synaesthesia, a term usually used to name rather unusual stylistic effects found most often in Romantic and Symbolist poetry. A *locus classicus* might be Baudelaire. Yet etymologically synaesthesia means simply feeling together, thus a feeling together, or a coordination of senses within a single experience to explore it or to render it in writing in a multi-dimensional fashion. Such coordination of sense impressions is the best way of creating a vivid sense of the reality of the thing described,

regardless of how it is done or the particular sort of diction used, or indeed whether in verse or in prose. In fact, we can actually find the classic crossing of senses in Bishop just as Baudelaire might recommend, though here at least in a more sober spirit:

At night you'd think
 My house abandoned.
 Come closer. You
 Can see and hear
 The writing paper
 Lines of light
 And the voices of my radio

 Singing flamencos
 In between
 The lottery numbers. [34]

We not only see but also hear the writing paper lines of light, and it is as if this light is itself somehow the medium which brings us the voices and music of the radio. Scientifically we know that the medium for this is the air, yet the impression is accurate in a larger sense and not just an illusion: it embodies the idea of depth and projection of both light and sound from this depth at once. The lines are like sight lines but they direct not merely our vision but also our hearing to penetrate into the dark space that seems to both beckon us and push us away simultaneously. It is this spatial depth and our penetration into it that are the real subject of the passage, and indeed of many of our experiences abroad in the night. It is consistent with both physical reality and our faculties that light and sound might be fused, since both must come to us across distance and in doing so reveal such depths, becoming partial guides to them. Yet in addition to the idea of depth there is also that of activity, and then, following this, human activity specifically -- in the form of voices and movement. As soon as we have these concepts, we have also the idea of privacy of some kind and an *interior* where it would take place --

two things which do not apply to the night itself at all but only to dwellings and habitations. All of this is conveyed in a kind of rapid zooming in, by this crossing of eye and ear. Yet it is not in any way irrational; it is rather based upon an accurate presentation of how our faculties deal with dark space, of how sound and light travel through such space, and then of some fundamental distinctions we are able to make based on these experiences -- in this case, we recognize a dwelling and the privacy of a dwelling even as we delineate undifferentiated regions of space from each other, and then, further differentiate interior from exterior.

Yet painting and the painterly deal not only with space and vision in the narrow sense but also with a more complicated sense of the sheer materiality of substance, the suchness of specific hues and textures -- not that blue but *this* one, this one and not that, not that sort of green but this very green and not there but *here* -- edged with this agitated thickening of brush work, or becalmed and isolated with an air-brushed disembodiment. Here, speaking of such things with a practitioner's expertise, a practitioner of *both* painting and writing, is Henri Michaux:

When I saw the first show of Paul Klee's paintings, I remember I came back bowed in a great silence....

Thanks to the constantly moving, minute modulations of his colors -- which did not seem applied but exhaled in the right spot, or naturally rooted like moss or rare molds -- his "still lifes" in the delicate tones of old things seemed to have ripened, to have acquired age and a slow organic life, to have come into the world by gradual emanations.

A few red dots were singing tenor over the general pianissimo. Nonetheless one felt that one was underground, looking at water, at enchantments, with the soul of a chrysalis.

The complex network of lines appeared little by little.

Lines living with the little people of dust and dots, crossing crumbs, going around cells, fields of cells, or turning, turning in spirals to fascinate – or to find what had fascinated – umbelliferous plants and agates. [316]

A utopian desire moves both into the material suchness of perception and the material perceived; the first -- the physical organs themselves, their animated neurology and biochemistry -- glows with an inner lambency, in tension and inherent homeostatic stabilization, this latter continually endangered and continually reassured by alternate luring and incitement, satisfaction and fatigue; and the second -- the material itself perceived -- paint and ground, specific facture, light itself -- becomes charged and self-possessed with an advent of significance never before divulged. Space fills and is shaped around the object, and the eye seizes both, an unspecified desire moving outward to meet, to absorb and to be absorbed -- not so much in an object as in an opening dimension, as though a wall were to suddenly fall away revealing an unsuspected cityscape; and yet this desire, rather this avidity, moves beyond that plane, past it, and yet also into it, both simultaneously (and it is part of this experience, as likewise of sexual experience, that these two things are the same) even as what is perceived is thought to be beautiful or significant. The object and the gaze that sees both become, together, a kind of door through which one moves, as though into a deeper and enlarged existence: a utopian promise glimmers within the images revealed, to the surprised speaker as much as to us the surprised readers. An irony lingers perhaps, yet it is located beyond that moment, outside of its context and as though in memory or in an afterthought, as one hears the rain outside the bedroom window, for clearly this desire can never achieve what it wants to nor reach its destination. Autobiography is shunned, and yet its inner motivation, an

encompassing description from a somewhat “meta” perspective, remains an active motivation, prompting perception and the effort to depict it. These impulses -- to grasp the real -- nag continually, sometimes in disguised forms, yet they cannot be satisfied by mere stylistic tricks of whatever kind, and when they are pursued in their true nature they reveal, progressively, the surrounding context of a life. This brings forward the inevitable ironies, the further issues of context which prompt one to ask not merely, What am I? -- my life, my self, my body? -- but also, Where am I? And, *Why* am I here? In this way, adumbrations of political awareness seep into description and self-description. Slowly perhaps, one recognizes, as a penumbra to one’s personal fate, a realm of violence and of oppression, which cannot be depicted, or could not easily be. It is a human outrage that can only be alluded to or considered from a distance. Yet its place of operation, the society one lives in, and its victims, the people themselves, must be shown somehow; a burden of conscience weighs upon the disabused stylist. In direct contrast to the allegorical mode, the particular -- the particular person, the particular scene of specific crime -- pulls the writing away from the general and the typical. And we find ourselves, then, on the threshold of actual history as likewise of realism. Let us now examine the author’s gradual progress toward such an encompassing realism, beginning with her initial allegorically influenced work and proceeding then to her more realistic pieces. As we do, we will see how she fills in, as though point by point, a picture of the political regime under which she was born and in which she lived the first part of her life, as well as, then, the alternative values and practices of which she becomes aware during her time in a foreign culture and society. We will notice, throughout, her implied critical reflections on the first, as well as her ambivalent relations to the second, and eventually

we will encounter her complex reflection on her own historical position as this comes to dominate the last phase of her work.

NOTES

1. The crucial texts by Lukasec are *History and Class Consciousness*, “Realism in the Balance” and *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*; Trotsky’s great text is *Literature and Revolution*; the crucial work by Ernst Bloch is the three-volume *Hope the Principle*.
2. It is well known that Brecht kept a miniature of a donkey on his desk with a sign around its neck saying “I too must understand it.”
3. “.Ausfahrt” Ingeborg Bachmann. *In the Storm of Roses: Selected Poems by Ingeborg Bachmann*. Trans. Mark Anderson. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986.

Departure

Smoke is rising from the land.
Keep your eyes on the small fishing huts,
For the sun will go down
Before you've put even ten miles behind you.

Dark water now, thousand-eyed,
Opens its lashes of white foam
To regard you, opens them wide and long,
Thirty days long.

And even when the ship stamps down hard
Taking an uncertain step,
Stand calmly on deck.

At the tables now there'll be fish,
The smoked fish;
The men, kneeling down,
Will tend to their nets,
Though at night they will sleep

For an hour or two;
 Then their hands will grow softer,
 Free of salt and of oil --
 Soft as the bread of dreams,
 The bread that they break.

The first wave of night strikes the shoreline,
 The second one reaches you.
 But then looking beyond it
 You can still see the tree
 Holding stubborn its one arm aloft.
 The wind has already broken one down.

And you think: how much longer,
 How much longer
 Can the crooked timber hold out in the weather?
 The land is no more to be seen.
 You should have clawed at the sand bank with one hand
 Or pinned yourself to the cliff with a lock of hair.

Blowing into their shells, the monsters of the sea
 Glide on the backs of waves; they ride with bright sabers
 And strike the days into fragments.
 A red trail is left in the water;
 There where your sleep lays you down
 For the rest of your hours,
 Your senses fading.

Then something's gone wrong with the lines.
 They call you, and you're glad
 To be needed. The best thing of all
 Is the work,
 On ships that fare forward --
 Tying line knots, the bailing,
 Seams to be caulked, keeping watch by the freight;
 The best thing of all, to be tired at evening
 And to fall into bed; the best thing, at morning
 To be bright with the first sun,
 To stand there against the unmovable sky,
 Not to give thought to impassable waters
 But bring the ship forward over the waves,
 Toward the sun-bank that always returns.

("Ausfahrt," Ingeborg Bachmann; trans. Steven Frattali)

4. For an allegorically inspired reading of Rich's "Diving into the Wreck" and Bishop's "At the Fishhouses." See Roger Gilbert *Twentieth Century Literature* Summer 1997.

CHAPTER TWO REGION OF UNLIKENESS/THE PLACE OF ALLEGORY

The pieces we examine in this chapter all come from the author's first collection, published in 1946. This book, *North & South*, is actually divided into two parts, though they are not formally marked with any division in the text. Yet a difference can be seen between the poems that come earlier in the volume and those in the latter portion. In the first, we seem to be in a much more abstract, conceptual world, and the connection with allegorical modes is fairly clear; in the second half, a more sensuous naturalism takes over, and it is the natural world -- the minutia of its flora and fauna, their color, shape and texture -- that inspires it. We will have to inquire about this very transition later; for now we only note it and note, too, that it is not absolute; there are certainly many naturalistic touches which enliven the poems in the book's earlier section also, keeping them within that fascinating border region between allegory and mimesis, description and code, that we have tried to identify. Yet still it seems equally clear that they strain away from the natural world as such to move within their own imaginative space.

THE MAP/ TRAVEL WITHOUT LEAVING

"The Map" occupies a special place in Bishop's poems. It is the first poem of her first book, and since everything about this author's work is carefully considered, its placement seems not merely accidental but more like a conscious opening gesture. Like the Bachmann piece we looked at, it is a poem of travel, of embarkation, of going away,

yet it presents not so much the experience of travel itself but rather the underlying desire that would motivate it. Here we find this desire for the new, for elsewhere, presented as though in its moment of incipience, as it is just beginning to emerge out of a vague background of daydreams and idle fancies. This emergence of a focused desire out of inchoate reverie seems to be its theme. Perhaps appropriately, the poet adopts a faux-naïf persona, and so the work has something of the tone of a child speaking.

To begin with we find a seemingly misplaced concreteness. Why should a map be the object of such careful description, and a description which, beneath its naive surface, conceals strange depths of emotion? The poem is based on a sort of category mistake, a conceptual reversal: take what is not intended as a picture and describe it in pictorial terms. Then go a step further and let the emotion build up by suggestion beneath the denotative meanings of your words and phrases. Will another, entirely different map then be drawn? According to Sally Bishop Shigley professional cartographers consider color to be one of the most weighted choices they must make, because people respond emotionally to it. [Shigley 23] Here the cartographer's *mathesis* is subjected to a peculiar and amusing expansion of significance, so that a new semiotics emerges, one consisting of color, texture, and Rorschach-like shape associations. This releases in the speaker what seems a kind of fanciful daydreaming mentality. In Ernst Bloch daydreams are thought to be revelatory of the desires held in the recesses of the mind but not recognized or admitted. Yet these daydreams are not thought of as the frustrated hopes of individuals only but as clues to what society as a whole might become. Daydreams are significant not just for the individual who has them, but for the whole social realm, and they are the precursors of possible future.[1] Deleuze himself says somewhere that societies are

always *leaking*, fleeing from their own “molar” organizations through individual events of flight or escape, which is, after all, a thing more desire-driven than dissent, more dynamic, and tending to create, to whatever degree that it can, the alternative to the status quo which it needs and seeks.[2] Yet daydreaming is a sort of code, for often what is dreamt of is not really what is desired. Rather it expresses the other life that is sought not by the dreamer alone but by many others as well. It is another life, or a variety of lives, beginning to be present, if only virtually, in a given society, which is thus being imperceptibly changed from within, though as yet society cannot realize this. History, in the daydreaming voice of a woman pretending to be a child, is already taking unsuspected directions. In this piece we see not so much a criticism and contesting of the north American regime but an incipient transcending of it from within, a flight elsewhere without movement, a traveling in one spot.

Is it a flight that any of us might take? Or is the speaker so peculiar that we cannot think of her as typical, as representing what we all might wish to do? To treat a map as though it were a picture is a “mistake” characteristic of children. A child is only a child, yet a child’s voice, when it appears in an adult’s writing, is the emblem of the adult self in transit, in transition, and perhaps in a crisis of self-creation. Sometimes, in fact, one feels that Bishop’s work could be divided into “we” poems and “I” poems, for in some pieces she speaks in the plural first person; but in others there is simply I, the voice of the self. Here the question seems primarily, How shall I live. The “we” does not seem to be as much an issue, and the piece does not have that range of communal resonances that we saw coming and going in Bachmann’s poem or even in that of Adrienne Rich.

Perhaps for this reason, this inherent privacy, the poem has a rather odd form. The first and last stanzas reflect each other, and there is a use of repeated words linking the first and fourth and fifth and eighth lines of each. This word doubling and the rhymes of the opposed lines creates a peculiar, artificial effect. It is perhaps slightly humorous. Yet it also tends to restrain utterance, and there is a somewhat careful, tentative movement to both stanzas. Significantly, all the questions in the poem -- there are three -- are in those parts, which seem to move in a point by point way with somewhat tentative departures into fanciful speculation. In the middle stanza, however, the lines are more expansive, and the rhythm is allowed to play out a bit more. The first line of this stanza and the sixth actually are iambic pentameter or nearly so, and both lines begin what seem to be the two thought-movements that comprise this middle section; in both cases the lines succeeding the initial one are longer, and more irregular, so that there is a kind of rhythmic expansion -- an expressive opening up -- which takes off from these two more contained utterances. The effect is of thought reaching out with slightly gathering excitement from a point of departure. This contrasts with the somewhat more step by step movement of the outer two stanzas. The form of the piece, therefore, creates the impression of a containment within which a kind of searching or probing takes place, followed by a partial release and then a re-containment.

We begin with a statement of place; one is situated, although vaguely: "Land lies in water." The tone is that of a child reciting a lesson or learning a rule. Is it by following rules, however, that we learn our place in the world or what the concept of "place" itself involves? Or is it rather by direct experience? Here, in this poem, direct experience is not of nature, which has been excluded quite strictly. We do not experience the world,

perhaps one might say we are not allowed to. If the voice of the poem imitates the naive voice of a child, perhaps there is a supervising presence hovering over it by implication, a spirit of *in loco parentis*, the invisible powers which yet determine what is seen. These would be the map-maker or makers, though they are not necessarily the ones mentioned in the poem's last line. The speaker hints at these offstage presences with the mention of "shadows" in line two, a word which is immediately retracted, and so therefore heightened.

Land lies in water; it is shadowed green.
Shadows, or are they shallows, at its edges
Showing the line of long sea-weeded ledges
Where weeds hang to the simple blue from green.

Shadows become shallows almost at once, yet these shallows are themselves produced by the land which is imagined as reaching down under the sea, drawing it around itself. It seems, in other words, to be taming and domesticating it. One receives to some extent the general idea of what Bataille would call a restricted economy, that is, a limited and self-preserving order marked off from the encompassing flux of nature, with its continuous over-profusion and waste. [3]An example of a restricted economy would be an individual and the selfhood they create, since they are naturally concerned with preserving themselves and their integrity against assaults and encroachments. Yet a State, and all its ideological apparatus, could be another example. There are, therefore, two different restricted orders which attempt to perpetuate themselves over against a formless sea -- the land itself, which is obscurely felt to have a life of its own, and then the speaker. There is also the feeling that these two entities, speaker and land, are in some sort of opposition, though it is not a sharp one.

The poem seems to become much more daring in the middle stanza, and there is a more pronounced appeal to the senses. The lovely bays, which are under a glass (evidently the map is in a case of some sort) are focused in a momentary close-up which makes them seem like the buds of flowers. Labrador's yellow glows with such a sheen that it looks as though it has been oiled, and in our close inspection, we notice the names of towns and cities running like a secret script out into the sea and across mountains. Certainly it would be wonderful if we could move over the face of the earth with such ease, so little hampered by the realities of time, place, and distance, to say nothing of borders and passports and the official apparatus connected to them -- the state, the army, the police. In this stanza it is as if the physical and affective life are either retrieved from some kind of amnesia or discovered for the first time. Emotional excitement is ascribed to the printer, but it is the speaker who really feels it, all the while recognizing that it exceeds its cause. And yet why should there be such emotion, if it is not that there is an unexpected discovery taking place? It is not so much a discovery of the world itself -- and this is the poem's limitation -- as of our capacity to be affected by the world. The capacity to see, to feel -- has welled up within the context of the daydream -- there is a discreet eroticism implied in the repeated tactile imagery of stroking lovely bays and feeling the smoothness of fabrics -- and by this point completely overwhelms the object that prompts it, the map, which is the quintessential image of life as already known, as interpreted by authorities and marked out, quite literally, on the grids provided by, created by, power and power relations. Yet as Bloch would maintain, the power of the daydream cannot be ignored, and it carries one beyond the horizon of the world so constituted, beyond its boundaries and its conceptual horizon, and breathes into it -- this

paper world which seems to be under glass -- a completely unexpected sense (understanding that word in all senses.) The effect is like a colored dye seeping through the rectilinear weave of a piece of cloth. This power of dream and desire is the excess, the unaccounted-for and the unaccountable, which overturns the mapmaker's semiotics with its own codes, which themselves resist codification, moving momentarily toward an anarchy of association. This seeming-anarchy is the first manifestation of freedom, one still trapped "within" and so only able to show itself in fancies, daydreams, and moods. We do not know if these are portents of action or not. Just as with Bachmann's piece, the ending leaves us still suspended, and we do not know what is likely to become of the speaker's desires and discontents. Yet they seem to revolve around a prohibition of the senses and a feeling that the political boundaries we live with are yet further prohibitions, that life is limited by the demarcations of the geopolitical order and that this limiting is, among other things, one of sensibility quite specifically. There are whole worlds of things we are not allowed to see, to feel, to know, because we cannot get to them, and there are whole selves we cannot become because of what we have not been able to do or been allowed to feel.

In the final four lines the poem reaches the most abstract statement of its theme: it is quite simply the theme of freedom, or rather the question of freedom. Are they determined by historical necessity, or can countries choose their colors? Is there a freedom of peoples, or, for that matter of individuals? What is the qualitative emblem, the color, under which one's life is lived. Is it the brightness of joy or rather the darkness of one of the sad passions? Is one's place in the world assigned or chosen, and is the ground note of one's life likewise imposed or chosen? Certainly these questions are

unanswerable. Here, though they are being silently considered by the day-dreamer, and thus retain their private nature, they are yet placed in a consciously geo-political context. Topography displays no favorites, and yet one of the most nagging questions an unhappy person asks is *where?* Where might things go better and, most of all, where might they have been different in the first place? North is as near as West, we are told. West, of course, once again might be seen as the emblematic direction of the United States. Yet in this poem, it simply implies the possibility of choice: go anywhere at all, it might seem to say. Yet everywhere you go or think to go, the map-maker will have preceded you. In a poem so dominated by questions, this freedom is placed under the heading of wish and daydream. A desire for something more is expressed by means of a complex conceptual reversal which liberates the imagination and the senses. But what will sustain it or give it purchase on reality?

A strange orientation in geo-politics is coded in deceptive terms in this work. Yet an impulse toward a freer, happier existence, moves beneath the surface, not without a counter-movement toward melancholy and anxiety, and, with this, an implied social critique. The style is neither the highly figurative symbolist/surrealist nor the stripped, plain style. It moves neither toward pure sensation nor toward unimpeded communication, but inhabits a border region outside of both orders, drawing on both and moving into its own dimension of allegorical figuration, a third approach which attempts neither to remove the fascination of substance entirely nor to immerse us in it as in a self-sufficient plenum. It attempts, as George Steiner points out, to make substance entirely significant of an ulterior meaning. The purpose is ultimately a critique of the present order which yet must be entirely derived from the physical givens of that order. It

therefore takes the form of reading the visible against itself. The poem seems to suggest that if we do this well enough, something else might emerge. Yet there really is no elsewhere politically, and certainly there is no higher realm, which is why we can have recourse to only what is visible. If this is the case, then the only utopian dimension is the one which everyone carries within them and which they must seek to realize around themselves and in the world, which is always the world of others. This consists of the primary emotions of love and friendship, the primary colors of work, the sheer physical enjoyment of life and of being together, and, if nothing else, the joy of seeing, of looking. Yet this utopian place, despite its basic simplicity, is never really reached. By devious means, in a coded language, in an indirect and mixed medium that leads through the cracks of history rather than into direct confrontation with it, a flight is attempted. Yet it does not lead to a place outside of any map (just as the modernist could never reach a place with no clocks). Instead there is a dialectic of desire and a second term which we might have some hesitation about naming. Yet certainly it is something like a general awareness of the repressive aspects of the North American society from which the author essentially fled.

In this poem, therefore, we see the author's initial attempt to describe her position in the world and in a sense also to describe that world. From the first she is aware not only of subjective experience but of the political and social context surrounding it, though this is presented only obliquely, in a coded way. In the next piece, she continues to use this coded style, turning it to a somewhat more abstract subject, a startling attempt to describe the ultimate ideological factors that govern that political regime and shape the types of subjectivities which can flourish with it.

THE IMAGINARY ICE BERG/THE IDEA OF THE IDEA

Like a number of these initial pieces, this unusual poem is marked by a certain artifice and contrivance. Not one of her sestinas -- a form that seems to haunt her work -- “The Imaginary Iceberg” nonetheless recalls it in certain ways -- in its line by line end stopped quality, similar to that seen in “The Map”, and in the frequent repetition of key words: *ship*, *snow*, or *snows*, *sea*, *sky*, and finally *iceberg* itself. This stylistic feature creates the impression that some sort of obsessive idea is being rehearsed in order to be satirized. Yet for this to be done well, it must be conjured before the reader’s mind in images that will be both strikingly visual and yet decidedly unreal. Actually the poem for all its oddness has received a fair degree of critical respect, generally turning around the idea of a dialectic of abstract and concrete or static and dynamic. David Bromwich for example sees it as the first glimpse of sexuality in the author’s work:

Sexuality is the most elusive feature of Bishop’s temperament---
Before writing any of the poem’s in *North & South* she had learned to
allegorize it subtly....Like other habitual concerns, it interests her
as it joins a care for what she sometimes calls the soul. This is an
argument carried on from poem to poem, but its first appearance,
in “The Imaginary Iceberg,” is startling.

Icebergs behoove the soul
(both being self-made from elements least visible)
to see them so: fleshed, fair, erected indivisible....

.[Bloom 167]

But let us look at the poem itself. The idea seems to be that we are aboard a ship moving through an ice field -- a dangerous situation; and in the midst of this we

encounter an extremely large iceberg. At one point, in the second stanza, the speaker describes this iceberg as it rises up and then sinks a bit, while yet remaining visible. Strangely, we are told that we would rather “have” it -- that is inhabit it -- than the ship itself. The natural relationship of ship and iceberg is like that of victim and assassin. Therefore to inhabit the iceberg is to escape the dangers of travel and adventure. Travel, perhaps her most persistent theme, here suggests the basic uncertainty of existence, as well as its changing nature; the iceberg, by contrast, is static; it is “stock still like cloudy rock.” This phrase is suggestive of so much in western culture that has been traditionally invested with an ultimate significance and an ultimate value: the timeless and the unchanging, the ahistorical and the transcendent. By “having” the iceberg one might possess Truth itself, perhaps; that is to say, not actual insight, which is inevitably historical and circumstantial, but a supervening faculty of abstract conception, the realm of the clouds, as Aristophanes famously satirizes it.

Yet the poem is not merely satirical. It invests this idea, the idea of the Idea, with a strange attractiveness as well. It is probably one of her least popular poems, yet I have found on various re-readings that it takes on an eerie beauty unlike any of her other pieces. There is a kind of rapt Parnassian splendor to some of the lines that recalls Leconte de Lisle or even Mallarme. Yet there is a lucidity as well and, as we have suggested, a perky satirical wit. For we notice that this Idea idea is also associated with ownership, and this occurs in one of the most beautiful sounding lines: “we’d rather own this breathing plain of snow.” A breathing plain of snow can only be the ice flow field itself as it moves slightly in the sea’s swell. Yet in apprehending this image, we realize that we have moved into a rather abstract, internalized and almost dreamlike mode of

presentation, which yet retains subtle connections with a visually oriented realism. It is as if the images themselves float somewhat free of their expected contexts. We have no longer the abstract conceptual approach of the poem's opening, with its easy connection to satire, nor a realism attuned, however schematically, to the visual presence of objects. Instead in this line we feel the mind dreaming and considering its own internal processes -- hence the snowfield is not described in any detail, except to call it "breathing," a word that lightly characterizes the movement of waves but also the movement of thought itself, as it too breathes, transpires within a contemplating and yet embodied mind.

The stanza's strange final lines must surely be seen as the mind addressing itself, assessing, in a wary and yet amused fashion, its inherent capacities and tendencies.

Snows are a traditional metaphor for dream or reverie, and so for the massive iceberg within us to pasture on the snows of reverie is for the concept to dominate the mind's economy to the exclusion of the free mental energy Geoffrey Hartman reminds us of when he alludes to the *motus animi continuus* that Cicero speaks of as the highest human pleasure, and which we might also identify as the source of creativity itself.[*Unmediated Vision* 127] Yet the piece is not merely a parable about the mind's relation to itself.

Indeed we have already seen its deft entrance into politics with the single word "own".

The desire for stability and fixity, things erroneously associated with the *cogito*, more accurately with the mind's capacity to conceive a purely abstract concept and then, crucially, to become infatuated with it, can also surely be associated with the political institution of ownership which, if nothing else, asserts a sovereignty extending beyond the I and over the object as well, an expanded sovereignty which can be, and has been, extended to whole continents. Perhaps the poem is secretly about this very tendency, and

in perfect allegorical fashion seeks to represent the imperial United States by the iceberg and a different United States, perhaps always endangered, by the ship and its errant voyage into the unknown. This would be the “lost America of love” to use the resonant title of Sherman Paul’s great study of the avante-garde tradition in American poetry. In practical terms (and it has been taken in practical terms at times) it has been the small community dedicated in some way to an idea of non-possessive enjoyment of the land, of each other, and of the world, but which tends to run continually afoul of that white clad idea, the government of Washington -- a very white city in every sense, after all, and one full of gleaming marble and any number of iceberg-like structures, which yet, like all icebergs, conceal much more beneath their collective surface. This would be to allegorize the poem quite drastically, or at least one part of it. If we do this with one part, do we have to do it with the rest? Yet we know that this might not be possible. Here again the ambiguous mode I was speaking of shows itself, and in fact in the very next stanza a greater and very subtle realism comes back into the work, as though to save it from floating off into too abstract a mode.

“The ice berg rises
And sinks again; its glassy pinnacles
Correct elliptics in the sky.”

To be honest, I do not know if icebergs actually behave this way -- to rise up and then sink down (or at least it would appear to sink down a bit) while yet remaining well above the water line, visible and looming, an impending, no doubt terrifying presence. Yet this is what we are presented with. However, this till now rather abstract idea of an iceberg begins to take on real presence and visual discrimination through a descriptive texture which yet retains a certain generality by not pursuing evocative detail past a limited point,

though we recall that David Bromwich quite readily associated it with sexuality. We may simply note that telling details have begun to infiltrate the text: glassy pinnacles and the scientific accuracy of ellipses in the sky; and later, to render the haze of snow lingering in the air, we find “the curtain/ is light enough to rise on finest ropes/that airy twists of snow provide.” Finally the rare diction of “wits” deftly conveys the flashing of harsh light on exposed ice peaks. There is even a certain peculiar accuracy about the movement of the final couplet -- seeming a bit awkward and contrived, its ponderous yet dance-like movement is a good analogue for an object that, though massive and of enormous weight, is yet in fact buoyant after all, floating in the ocean with no connection to the earth itself except by the water that holds it up. Again the underlying stylistic choices create an accurate metaphor for the idea of the Idea -- striking, almost mesmerizing, white with the whiteness of the Absolute, with just enough detail to be discernible or perhaps convincing, yet with no connection to the earth, and, finally, floating in a void.

At the same time there is something more conveyed by the slight touch of realism we have already mentioned which now, illuminating this second stanza with its few salient details, focuses an actual object and no longer an allegorical abstraction, bringing before the mind, if only in a still somewhat vague way, an actual iceberg impending above us, perhaps rising up unexpectedly, looming there, huge and horribly exposed in the bright harsh light, showing the pinnacles and crags of its uninhabitable terrain, in a way as alien as the surface of the moon. It is an instance of the Sublime, complete with its frightening quality, though the poem, with its genteel tone, softens terror to mere “surprise.” Is the sublime not always tied to an actual physical presence? And yet it cannot be the sexuality that Bromwich sees hinted at. Perhaps the poem is one of her pieces most frequently

misread --- owing to the effect of words derived from “errection” and the like, but more to the point, owing to the entire habit of representing sexuality as a matter of cold and warmth, earthly and heavenly, and similar pairings. For even Sally Bishop Shigley in one of the most elaborate (and perceptive) readings concludes in the following way:

Icebergs, we are told, ask the soul to see them as real (“Fleshed”),
Created (“erected”), and “indivisible.” Icebergs want the soul to see them
As real, beautiful *and* created...[27]

The poem would tend to suggest this, for it achieves its slight suggestion of real power and magnitude only when it takes account of physical actualities. There can be no wholly internalized, purely conceptual sublimity; instead it must have a basis in actual encounter. That is what must function as the source of surprise and thence of fear. The poem seems to have insight into this process in the way it suggests first the dream and then, by stages, the reality behind it.

The dream, however, is never entirely dissipated; in fact, the real moves only slowly into the economy of the mind. The poem’s ponderous movement and repetitiveness suggest this very reluctance, a reluctance reinforced by, among other things, a tendency toward repeated and indeed obsessive motifs. Yet perhaps a smooth, all too smooth, link between dream and existence is provided by the idea of ownership (of “having” as the poem’s very first line puts it). For the concept of ownership, as we have pointed out, merely extends a sovereignty from an I to an object, including the object, and any object, within the I’s luminous aura. By this means fantasy projections, including the power fantasies of an Ahab, for example, and the objective world in itself are mingled. Clearly this process could also be the vehicle of racism to say nothing of imperialism -- Iceberg USA. Thus we are reminded not so much of the sublime itself – which, when actually

encountered, tends to push the individual in the direction of humility -- but rather with the imagined, and entirely bogus, sublimity of the Self which thinks it can own or control the world.

What can counter the iceberg? Perhaps it is the “we” of the poem’s first line -- the basic fact of communication with another and the community this implies. These would be factors different from the sexuality that seems to have distracted more than one commentator. In any event, the iceberg of imperialism is linked to the myth of ownership and to its various engines. The poem in fact becomes almost grim in its last stanza: the iceberg “cuts” within, revealing things which are “like jewelry from a grave.” One is reminded of the personal items confiscated from genocide victims and then stored or simply left in piles -- shoes, clothing, jewelry, gold teeth. Ownership itself has its powers of narcissism which yet are anything but passive, and there is no conceivable limit to its scope of operation, either without, in the social sphere, or within, in the economy of the individual, for the phallic overtones of the last lines suggest that it is possible for persons to see themselves as embodiments of Power or what is perhaps worse, a representative of some transcendent One.

Icebergs behoove the soul
(both being self-made from elements least visible)
To see them so: fleshed, fair, erected indivisible.

We might see the poem as a sort of cautionary parable, therefore, not merely about the mind’s relation to itself but also about the consequences of this for society and for the human person. The tone -- somewhat whimsical, and yet with unexpected grimness here and there -- encourages this response to a degree. The poem’s ambiguity lies in this

fact -- that one may be charmed or even seduced by its language while also seeing its underlying theme, at least in its barest outline -- that the impulse toward conception, imagination, and perhaps also the narcissism of power fantasies and the like is an inescapable force but yet is also delusory and a means of imperialism through the vehicle -- seemingly ordinary -- of ownership. The result of this process is a kind of sedimentation of culture and ideas. This bad unity is what the poet imagines during a seashore trip in which the waves become machines of war:

A thousand warriors in the sea
could not consider such a war
as that the sea itself contrives

but hasn't put in action yet.
This morning's glitterings reveal
"The sea is all a case of knives."

[“Wading at Wellfleet”][*CP* 7]

Surely this must be a kind of veiled reaction to the growing militarism of American society then only just beginning. Yet it is nothing other than a further manifestation of the iceberg, this time of a more active sort, as one of the “engines” that we have already mentioned.

THE WEED/LIBIDINAL ECONOMY

With this piece, the author attempts a further characterization of the style of subjectivity that is encouraged by her cultural and political context. “The Weed,” in fact, represents her work at its most rhetorically intense; employing an insistent, accentual-syllabic verse tending toward heavily stressed iambs and frequent spondees, it exhibits an elaborate metaphysical conceit in its strange dream narrative, and this combination, along

with the convention of the dream vision itself -- in which things can happen rather arbitrarily -- gives the poem an incantatory force that is unique in her work.

“I dreamed that dead, and meditating,
I lay upon a grave, or bed,
(at least, some cold and close built bower).
In the cold heart, its final thought
Stood frozen, drawn immense and clear,
Stiff and idle as I was there;
And we remained unchanged together
For a year, a minute, an hour.” [20]

The first three lines create an image that recalls any number of pre-Raphaelite paintings, both in the motif presented -- a sleeping woman in an enclosed or embowered space -- and in the elaborate style. In addition, the image of the arbor is also crypt-like and strangely lifeless. These pre-Raphaelite motifs are themselves derived from the medieval romance tradition encompassed most fully and presented most influentially by Spenser and then passed down to the major Romantic poets who drew inspiration from him -- Keats certainly, but also Blake and Shelley. There is a disquieting echo of Poe as well -- no doubt because of this impression of lifelessness and burial. This outward physical immobility is combined with intense, though undefined, inner activity and ferment. In fact, the last line quoted, though at first appearing to be a slight flaw (in that its syntax seems slightly out of logical sequence -- one might prefer it as “a year, an hour, a minute”, or as the reverse, so that the line’s actual sequence seems at first a rhyme fetch) is yet not a flaw, since, as it stands, it can suggest the beginning or re-beginning of a time consciousness that had been suspended: a year is vague and generic, a rhetorical shorthand, a minute likewise (“I’ll be back in a minute.”), but an hour has a degree of specificity that suggests actual time consciousness. And so the poem starts with a

moment of reawakening or reemergence. And yet what is the final thought that stands in the cold heart, “frozen, drawn immense and clear?” It cannot be the thought of death, since this thought is, in a sense, ungraspable by the mind. This question is a key to the poem’s overall meaning, and we must not be too hasty, since it is a deceptive poem, in some ways deliberately hermetic (unusual for this writer) and more allusive than is customary for her.

Suddenly there was a motion,
 As startling, there, to every sense
 As an explosion. Then it dropped
 To insistent, cautious creeping
 In the region of the heart,
 Prodding me from desperate sleep.
 I raised my head. A slight young weed
 Had pushed up through the heart and its
 Green head was nodding on the breast.
 (All this was in the dark.)

Again one hears allusions, though buried ones. Yet is this not actually the main theme? -- repetition is a power, yet it is not necessarily obvious in its effects or its significance. In its totality it constitutes the hidden dimensions of life. Though obscure, it is filled with subsidiary powers -- call them talents, dreams, impressions, memories, neural networks, spirits if you like. Yet all cultural and biological forms are orchestrations of this fundamental power of repetition, with its attendant differences. One of these manifestations is sexuality, but it is only one. The eloquence of Bonnie Costello’s psycho-sexual reading, however, demands quotation:

“The Weed” still posits an inner region of perspectiveless selfhood, Designated by the darkness of the dream space. But that region quickly becomes subject to penetration, flux, and even illumination. Bishop vaguely suggests gender distinctions here. In “The Weed” the male space of the icon, of mental finality, of “stiff and idle” thoughts

is transformed to an iconoclastic female space of “the heart,” its broken membranes and cascading streams associating the heart with the womb.... She treats the weed as a newborn baby or a poem from the heart. The very dynamic, contradictory, and open nature of that psychological space denies static oppositions, of male/female, inner/outer, feeling/thought, body/mind, pain/pleasure, any rigid alignments of its images....

The most discomfiting contradictions in the poem arise as Bishop details the physical features of the psychological space. Although Mind and body meet on a third, metamorphic plane of geology, they converge rather than synthesize. Two arterial or amniotic rivers flow into the externalized “black grains of earth,” but they also shower the weed with “thoughts.” They “glance” off the sides as if they were eyes, and the drops on the dreamer’s eyes empower her with sight, even in the dark. Sight cannot simply be made a trope of insight; the dream is “in the dark” yet intensely visual. [133]

Against this I must place Deleuze at the opening of his great work, *Difference and Repetition*.

Generality presents two major orders: the qualitative order of resemblances and the quantitative order of equivalences. Cycles and equalities are their respective symbols. But in any case, generality, expresses a point of view according to which one term may be exchanged or substituted for another. The exchange or substitution of particulars defines our conduct in relation to generality. ...By contrast, we can see that repetition is a necessary and justified conduct only in relation to that which cannot be replaced. Repetition as a conduct and a point of view concerns non-exchangeable and non-substitutable singularities. Reflections, echoes, doubles and souls do not belong to the domain of resemblance or equivalence; and it is no more possible to exchange one’s soul than it is to substitute real twins for one another. [1]

The poem explores an area of life partly psychic, partly biological; within these regions of transformation, perhaps of sexuality, or even of illness and recovery, trauma and recovery from it, the poem enacts a basic scenario of regeneration and repetition simultaneously. It is ambiguous in that sense, in that it proposes both liberation and bondage, freedom and unfreedom. Its almost lightless world is a metaphor for the genuine obscurity of this human realm, and its ambiguity is an indication of the

ambiguous nature of human existence itself; its simultaneous joy and anguish, its ability to liberate itself from material subjection into culture, and yet its inability to do so completely. Is it possible to make positive statements concerning such a fundamental and yet enigmatic area of existence, or is discourse concerning it inevitably bound to create reified and misleading structures that are influenced too much by the forms of rationality and a simplistic imagination? This is the difficulty of psychoanalysis. As a way of dealing with this problem, the poem proposes a series of heuristic images which yet have a self-revising dynamism. It is as if the images could go on and on regenerating out of themselves, out of the stream that carries them and the poet along. In this way the style resembles that of the rhapsodic and self-reflexive school of Shelley, Ashbery, and others (rather than the Herbert that the poet says it was modeled on). [Lombardi 133]

At the same time, however, everything depends upon the tone, and this is the reason for the allusions. They anchor the work in a certain earnestness, and since they are borrowed, it is almost as if the poet did not trust or want to reveal her own voice, her own subjectivity, except in a veiled and mediated way. The poem must not become personal confession or hallucination; the dream it proposes is highly conventionalized and full of traditional motifs, in order that its preoccupations should not be mistaken as merely personal pathology. Yet though borrowed and different from each other, these motifs have in common an underlying *gravitas*. They are American poetry at its most daring and truly sublime; as such they have no connection, and want no connection, with the eternal enemies of promise, the genteel, always so plentiful in American literature and culture generally. They combat it with severity, with visionary harshness, with a strategy which, so powerful, draws all of the rest of the poem after it; and it is as if we see the entire

structure in danger of being lost in these two powerful streams -- buried allusions becoming the recurrent bass notes that anchors the flight of fancy, of images and phantasmagoria, giving it a seriousness of intent, a grimness of mood (yet not without touches of humor here and there) that prevent it from being a mere exercise.

What is our biological existence in any case? What is the process by which we awaken to sexuality, to illness, to recovery? What is the inner power -- a cliché word *power*, but inescapable -- that enables one in so many endeavors of mind and body and then, inexplicably, at a certain point, fails? And so a degree of non-recognition is essential for one's life to function. Here we have only stumbled upon more Freud. But only in the sense that there is perhaps no escape -- not from his discourse, but from the realities that it blunderingly attempts to capture. But there is no insight either. The mere fact of repetition does not indicate that we have learned anything. And yet it is not mere compulsion or biological impulse that we feel. Why do we read, after all? There is no guarantee of anything, of course, however the more buried and obscure repetition is, the more likely it is to engage with a greater number of our most primitive memories. These are not memories in the psychoanalytic sense, memories that could be a subject for discussion or even the content of a dream. It may indeed be wholly physical -- as the imagery of the poem is -- or instead inhabit a shifting border region between physical and psychic that we have no terms for. This is the reason for the imagery's strange combination of qualities: its artfulness, its deadness, yet its animation too, and its biomorphism, which yet seems, "artsy", staged, painted and emblematic. It is not, in fact, allegory, just as our own dreams are not, but an intensive state that attunes us to the border region between biological and psychic, corporeal and consciousness. Within this

state, *our* perennial state is one of subjection and freedom, obsession and release, mere repetition and learning simultaneously.

The poem's political dimension lies also in this same allusiveness. If its inner core of experience is obscure, and perhaps touches on things that would be common to all cultures and all societies, the décor in which this is expressed is yet familiar and strangely specific -- the décor of late 19th century and early twentieth century gentility. Is there, was there, something excessively self-preoccupied and self-reflective in this culture, with its cult of inwardness, secrecy, individuality, and self-examination? Again the pre-Raphaelite artificiality and contrivance, the mirror effects and suggestions of infinite regresses suggest a diagnosis of some sort: a cultural malaise vaguely indicated, having to do with the inherent isolation of the self in a context which does not give it enough opportunities for productive involvement. The mind and body, and the complex libidinal life which is their interaction and fusion, must feed upon a degree of self-involution: auto-affection is the beginning of affection per se. Yet here we see an exaggeration of this, so that auto-affection becomes a quagmire, consciousness a mirror realm and prison, only apparently illuminated and obsessed with fragmentary bits of objects, and dream becomes nightmare. The capacity of infinity itself, rather than a dignity and creative power, becomes the bad infinity of Hegel. We are given an analysis, in an indirect yet powerful way, of the underlying nature of so many of the neurotic patterns that characterize our collective social landscape -- whether in the form of addictive and self-destructive behavior, or else as more deeply buried delusions, depressions, and festering resentments. The simultaneous illuminating and obscuring of the mind, its simultaneous freedom and bondage, are dramatized in a phantasmagoria drawn, if not from the characteristic décor

of the modern and contemporary culture of narcissism and consumption, then from its precursor, the late-romantic and early modern culture of reflection and self-absorption.

THE UNBELIEVER/THE CULTURE OF PARANOIA

If ownership is the legal means by which a sovereign “I” extends its sovereignty, its more psychological -- and extreme -- vehicle is paranoia. It is interesting then that one of the most spirited and amusing portraits of this state is also found in this volume, the ironically entitled “The Unbeliever,” ironically since the problem of the paranoid is not that they do not believe but that they believe all too intensely. Stylistically we can note that the galloping movement of the verse seems intended to convey a sort of parody version of flight or soaring. Yet of course the mast sleeper is not really traveling anywhere (except where the ship itself goes). The whole poem enacts this paradoxical motionless motion – in fact, it is not even motion without direction; it is rather a sort of agitated motility imitating movement. This would seem to convey a sense of internal activity mobilized to no external purpose, but of course this is part of the nature of dream. Here the narcissism of dream is conveyed through the voices that whisper to the protagonist, giving him pseudo-reports on his situation. And in fact the images are all of marble and reflecting surfaces -- marble wings, marble pillars, gilded balls and what have you, all suggesting an old fashioned public structure, something like a monument or perhaps a mausoleum.

Does he, therefore, inhabit his own death in some visionary fashion, speaking from it in the way that the speakers in poems by Dylan Thomas speak from a point before their birth or conception? Perhaps we should simply say that he exists at a remove from the world, from others, and from all action: enclosed in his metal sphere, he exists in the world without having to take part in it. Nor does he actually observe it, since information about it comes through the disinformation of dream voices. Thus his essential preoccupations are self-reflection, self-immurement (his eyes shut tight) and a dream of flight that alternates with the fear of falling, a fear expressed only in the last stanza. It is as if the real subject of the poem emerges clearly only then. It is actually a poem about the paranoid fear of the external, and of contingency. In this respect it shows perhaps some influence of existentialist discourse. The sense of venture which even day to day existence requires, and the need for a certain resolve in meeting this, is implied in these constant figures of crouching, covering, and wary gathering of information on the dangerous outside world as it streams by below. To sleep on the top of a mast is an accurate metaphor for our existential condition in which we are only dimly aware of the world as we go through it, aware enough to avoid the most obvious mistakes and accidents, but not aware enough to have a real grasp even of its most basic realities -- of light, sky, sea and sun, of the actual objects before us as we walk through the city, of the objects in this very room, where I write this page, the paper before me, its coolness and smoothness, the light screen of my computer monitor glowing, the entirely different light that streams in through the window, the others who come toward me on the street in friendship, hostility, desire or indifference, and then these desires and hostilities themselves as they ebb and flow within me, develop or recede according to circumstances

and over time. All of this is the world, quite simply; yet it is represented in the poem by a drastic and cursory metonymy: the sea below, the sky and wind out there. But in our actual existence -- here and now -- what do we really know, and what do we feel? Is it possible for us to take hold of the concrete life that streams through us, only part of which is under our control, as so much practical experience makes evident to us, none more clearly than illness; is it possible for our existence, in its complexity and contingency, to be truly grasped by the mind that recognizes, construes and creates, that speaks coherently to others and to itself? Or is it rather the case that we move always blindly forward, like persons sleepwalking through the world? Insight, of course, is an occasional thing. There are moments of clarity, moments of recognition; but these moments fade, and the insight brought with them fades to become part of memory, or, not even that, but rather part of the known, like any piece of book learning or hearsay, and with only the vaguest connection to our actual and immediate feeling, which seems to have gone on its own way almost unaffected by what it itself knew and felt, felt and recognized. Nonetheless, once, perhaps only days, hours or even moments before, it *was* our experience in its fullest and deepest extent, or so we thought at the time. Yet time has intervened to take us away from ourselves; as though the life of insight -- and every life has them, and the concrete knowledge of this is one of the bases for all democracy -- and the life of the mundane self go down the stream of time by different routes, and come together only occasionally, then to separate almost at once.

Still there is within us an intense need to awaken, to see, to feel, to know the world and our situation in it as clearly as possible. For one thing, the world is dangerous; we are always in peril, more so even than the greatest paranoid can realize; it is only by a

miraculous reprieve that I exist from one instant to the next. In addition, we have a desire to know, to understand, even to see. And yet sleeping on top of a mast is very much what is often done; we do not sleep on a placid lake but in a raging ocean. And though there is both need and desire to recognize, to perceive, there seems to be equally a kind of inherent evasion as well, which at times increases even as the need itself does. Perhaps this perversity or laziness or inherent clumsiness -- an innate conceptual, even perceptual, maladroitness, a tendency to always get it a little wrong -- is nowhere more pronounced than in the political sphere. The attempt to evade the present, in the existential realm, takes the form of bad faith, Freudian repression, and the like; in the political realm it takes the even more severe, because more encompassing forms of scapegoating, political paranoia and the drastic misrecognition that throws up constantly to view, and to power, one political hero after another, all subsequently left like driftwood on the beach of history. And yet the developing imperialism and militarism of American society makes these tendencies ever more pronounced, and if the American medical system produces the American body -- circumcised, breast enhanced, obese or gym built as the case may be -- the system of "thought management"¹ produces the American mind, anxiously awaiting some new supposed crisis or apocalypse, fearing or despising this, that, or the other group, domestic or foreign, and however defined.

A MIRACLE FOR BREAKFAST/ THE POLITICAL ALL TOO HUMAN

The political preoccupations of Bishop's poetry become quite clear in this piece, one of her sestinas. This form, often so difficult to handle and one which poets must strain to make appear natural, here seems deliberately chosen to lend a bit of obvious contrivance to the style at certain spots. This is one of the ways the poet signals her satirical intentions. The basic premise, that there is a group of people standing out in front of some great man's house, waiting to be given free food -- in this case the so-called continental breakfast of coffee and a roll -- in itself recalls the underlying political situation of the 30's -- mass unemployment, breadlines, perhaps also Roosevelt's famous fireside chats over the radio, but also the very different reality of mass demonstrations in which the public assembles outside the venues of power to express its disagreement or discontent. Finally it might call to mind the mass expressions of political "enthusiasm" known as rallies, such as took place in Germany and elsewhere during the fascist period.

Certainly the man whose appearance is awaited in the poem and who, in stanza three, makes his appearance, along with the sun, on the balcony, from which he then surveys the crowd and distributes to them mere crumbs of bread and small dollops of coffee, does suggest a Fuhrer or Duce figure. But he might also be some major capitalist - a Rockefeller, say, (with his dimes) or J.P. Morgan or, in our time, Bill Gates. Or it might simply be the U.S. president himself (any of them) understood as the official representative of this class. From this standpoint then the poem is a satire on what has

come to be known as trickle down economics (a self-satirizing phrase if their ever was one) and the figure in question might be Milton Friedman himself, some other Chicago savant, or even the great Hayeck.

All this is merely to indicate that the allegorical tendencies we sometimes see glimmering in the author's work here approach a limit of abstraction, or nearly so, and the limitation of motifs to only the most generic -- sun, river, balcony, waiting people, even great man himself -- creates an open range of possible meanings. Indeed the factors that work toward a delimitation of meaning -- a fixing of it along certain lines as opposed to others -- are all in the realm of *tone*: the slight contrivance provided by the sestina form itself, which we have already noted, and then, crucially, a remarkable modulation that occurs in the fifth stanza:

I can tell what I saw next; it was not a miracle.
A beautiful villa stood in the sun
And from its doors came the smell of hot coffee.
In front, a baroque white plaster balcony
Added by birds, who nest along the river,
-- I saw it with one eye close to the crumb --
And galleries and marble chambers.

Here the phrasing is clearly borrowed from the traditions of medieval and early modern religious dream visions and allegory -- Bunyan, *Piers Plowman* and the like. Following this, the extended syntax and opulent imagery create a vision of a mock-utopian kind. Earthly happiness, the land of milk and honey, await us. The fact that this idea of amplitude and abundance is used as a means of irony indicates the poem's deflationary intent. And yet what is being deflated, finally? Is it not important to know this? Is it the pretensions of supply side economics? The promises of the laissez-faire state? The New Deal? (In which case the piece would take its place along side some

of Robert Frost's anti-Roosevelt satires). Or is it the visions of Il Duce? Or was it rather Lenin on the balcony, after all, and the poem is an anti-Marxist satire? It seems to me impossible to say; it has an unfixed and shifting object. The relevance of this to our discussion lies in the way the political is courted to a degree, by means of an encoding allegorical tendency, but then finally evaded in favor of a much more general statement, in this case what would seem to be a rejection of the utopian. Thus the piece can be seen as a kind of palinode to "The Map" where a utopian desire seethes below the surface of day dreams and descriptions. Here we see that even if we could follow those lines that mark the surface of the map, as of the globe itself, and actually visit those places with their fascinating names, colored so invitingly by the map maker's art, we would find only this -- the eternal irony, the shadow falling, and always and everywhere falling, between promise and outcome, desire and reality, a shadow and an irony that seem to always preempt political action or even political imagination, the very desire to imagine things otherwise, the very ability to conceive means of possible realization. This would mean that the iceberg has given the ultimate lesson to the people waiting below, or in the seminar room; it has told them to reject all ideas of hope as being seductive distractions, when they are not actual delusions. The reality of the world -- enormous, sublime in the true sense, and certainly dangerous -- can never be dealt with by such means. Such is the wisdom of the iceberg.

Yet if we return to "The Map" we would have to say that desire itself is not on the map actually; instead, it is a power that infuses the map when the latter is seen from a certain standpoint -- quite simply from desire's standpoint; and desire, though perhaps always disappointed, is yet always sovereign and non-negotiable. Being the leader of no

realm, it cannot be assassinated, and its dominions, being everywhere, are effectively nowhere, and no air strike can destroy them. Thus it always returns, and we saw it returning even in “The Imaginary Iceberg” as the little ship sailed on for warmer waters. It is not a question of giving it up, therefore, but of changing its means of expression, and before that the terms in which it is conceived; the poems we have looked at so far are, in a sense, the preliminary exercises in this larger project -- changing the shape of desire, which was the poet’s ultimate task and to which all her work is dedicated. Yet to do this one must first see what it is, what it is capable of, what shapes it can still produce even in the land of unlikeness, the place most inhospitable and affording least room for maneuver -- the flat surface of a map, an iceberg, the St. Simeon Stilites pillar of a mast, a catatonic body, or, here, the roomier and yet issueless venue of the public square.

Our discussion so far has attempted to show how the author represents the desire for a greater, enlarged existence, or simply for happiness, when this desire is forced into a relatively narrow space, is impinged upon from without, or at least feels itself able to meet the demands placed upon it by society, or, in the case of the iceberg, by an entire cultural tradition (in that case, with its strict demand for the timeless and the transcendent) only with great difficulty and with some sense of inherent distortion. It is a worldly, clever, and yet defensive inspiration that we have seen. In the next two poems, though, which will conclude this first part of our discussion, we see a somewhat more contesting and visionary tendency, in which the author makes some slight movement toward not so much challenging the state of things as they are as exhibiting rather the conscious aspiration out of which such a challenge might come. The theme of the first piece, “The Man-Moth”, is in fact aspiration specifically, and, beyond that, the power that it has to

deal with adverse historical circumstances; that of the second, “Love Lies Sleeping” is the suppressed subject of history that would aspire to something better, that is, the working class in its attempt to find, or at least to envision, the life for itself that it properly should have.

THE MAN-MOTH /ASPIRATION AND IRONY

The poem “The Man-Moth” is one of Bishop’s most famous. It is easy to see why it would be, since it compresses into its mere 40 lines what seems an entire world of imagination, rich in color, startling, and amusing in its images, and possessing as well an array of haunting resonances that echo in the mind. It is an enigmatic piece, certainly, yet this has not deterred commentators from Robert Dale Parker who reads the poem as a parable on the conflict between wish and the foreknowledge of its disappointment to Helen M. Dennis whose Kant inspired reading contrasts the above and below ground worlds with the first as standing for the unreachable realm of the noumenal toward which the man-moth vainly aspires. The tendency among the earliest commentators (Parker and David Kaltsone) was to see the Man-Moth as a pathetic creature of some kind, while later readers have come to discern powers and capacities in him that might not appear at first. Though all previous commentators have useful things to say, I cannot help but feel that crucial aspects of the poem remain neglected, in particular its political resonances. Perhaps this is because, in addition to its complex style, it combines a number of unusual features which are all the more so for being made to co-exist in the same composition.

We find startling images that seem surreal or Kafkaesque, yet we also find a striking visual beauty and the civilized virtues of charm and humor.

It might be helpful to compare the piece with something similar, let us say, Louis Zukofsky's "Mantis," since in both we have a kind of underground man (or person) and in both cases he is represented as an insect -- something sufficiently remote from human form to allow the author to create a figure clearly intended to convey an idea, or various ideas, undiluted by distracting human characteristics. It is true, of course, that Zukovsky's Mantis is also an actual insect, and the allegorical element in his piece is combined with a fairly straight-forward realism: the speaker is in a subway; he sees the poor insect, which, because of its startling size and color, stands out against the gray of the underground environment. A newsboy is there also and makes a reassuring comment when the insect, seeming to panic, flies at the startled speaker.

It is actually a rather plain style in many respects, despite the contortions imposed by the sestina form and intricate sound effects. Indeed from the stand point of description, it is almost bare. The poet's interest is not with the visual or the sensuously evocative. He seeks to arrest the attention at a deeper level -- the all too distracted attention of his fellow citizens, the other inhabitants of the underground world -- and to direct and contain it in the torsions of thought imposed by this form, whose artificiality creates pauses in which the mind weighs and considers. In fact he wishes to press a moral and political awareness upon us, and the conclusion is even rather hortatory.

Thus a moral earnestness is combined with a formalist ingenuity to create a trap for the reader's awareness, holding it in the narrow confines of a small, comical event -- man meets insect in subway. The insect seems to be the embodiment of various concepts

-- fragility, the unnoticed thing of special importance which yet is endangered, and perhaps an alternative awareness which remains unstated -- those huge eyes which must see a great deal, though we cannot say what that is. It is an indicative figure which says "this order in which I am trapped is wrong, unnatural, and absurd". Finally, of course, there is an association with the poor and, at a remove, the actions which would improve their lot. What shall be done? is the question, or, rather, what will *you* do: and so a note of activism is struck, prying itself loose from the decor of allegory to fly at the reader's face, yet not to such an extent that the poem becomes excessively two-dimensional. In fact, the important choice of intricate form, besides slowing the reader, also slows the poet's own speech, preventing him from saying too much.

Yet what would he say? That is, what would it be productive or counterproductive to say? The tubes of concrete and steel are the embodiments of historical and economic forces, after all. About this and its consequences one might say a great deal. And in the last lines he envisions a change and is in fact brimming over with the sense of its necessity, yet since he cannot speak he is unable to say what it should be.

Perhaps the author wanted to avoid a type of rhetoric common at the time in which the aspirations of the Left -- whether Marxist or broadly socialist -- are stated too explicitly or proclaimed too loudly. Here, by contrast, the indirections of syntax, the hesitancy of rhythm and that deeply traditional indirection of allegory itself, serve to modulate the poet's moral fervor, saving it from a too-facile expression. Above all, a sense of the difficulty of achieving what is sought in the social sphere is preserved against a rhetorical tradition that tends to emphasize possibility and successful militancy. Though politically useful, such expression entails also a diminishment of the human,

especially of the sense of pathos, of the fragility of the endangered human errand in what is always a wilderness, even if one of human making. The poem's purpose is to restore this and an attendant sense of secrecy -- an inherent privacy of the person as such, even in the face of overwhelming historical forces, a privacy that is the necessary accompaniment to this vulnerability itself.

To turn to Bishop's poem is to encounter a somewhat contrasting inspiration, though a related one. In both cases we feel the unstated suggestion that the Underground Man is the carrier of an unspecified awareness -- that of alternatives, of an alternative view of history perhaps, or even of life and the world itself. In both cases, the subway represents the unacknowledged dimensions of that social order visible above ground; in both, the purpose is to raise this underground world and make it appear in the light of day and in the open. Yet both poems distance themselves not only from the political rhetoric already mentioned but also from excessive directness of any kind: hence their elaborateness and conscious artifice. If anything, one notices a greater earnestness in Zukofsky. Of course, he attempts a degree of humor as well, though it might do to say that his humor is slowly overwhelmed by other feelings -- anxiety, awareness of suffering, awareness of difficulty, perhaps an historical fatalism. Bishop, by contrast, is overtly more witty and more ironic, something that is perceptible right away in the very opening lines of her piece, though, given its strangeness and its peculiar fantasy, we might not realize this at first. An irony with respect to what? one might wonder. I believe we have already answered this in part. Yet irony is a means of finding freedom, even if only a virtual one, one confined to thought and feeling, to the inner world. This inner world is what one preserves, keeping it free of historical entanglements by means of irony. Like

the traditional maiden, one is saving oneself for something else. Not, of course for marriage, but rather for something loftier and more secluded. And perhaps it is true after all that the imagination wishes to be indulged. How well we recall this notable fact (and how could we not, having been told of it so often); indeed, even here it does, even here in the poem's eerie yet strangely simple opening lines.

One might almost imagine oneself in a rat lab, but no, it is only *here*, "here, above", in this cul de sac of history, this end time of the world, in which we crawl out from our cozy rabbit hutches and deluxe sandwich boards to face the destroyed spaces of the new world order. And so, there is a desire for fantasy and for imagination, even here. Yet this is nothing other than a desire for the beautiful, fundamentally. It is not that one can create one's own world, obviously; and it is not exactly a question of "the imagination" which one indulges, as though one were letting oneself give way to a bad habit of some sort. It is rather that the world makes its various and unavoidable demands through one's very perceptions themselves; these are imperatives to which one responds and to which one must respond -- the imperative of the eye, of the ear, of the senses themselves in their totality, the imperative to see and to touch the world, to feel it and to know it, a demand that cannot be evaded, since it streams in upon one at every moment, rising up even from within in the form of tonus, mood, proprioception, and appetency. Yet this response is enigmatic: it is nothing less than one's total self, and the process of making it is one's total life -- conscious, rational, more-than-rational -- intuitive. It is in this sense that the poem distills an entire effort to live in history, an effort that engages one's total being. It seems to be a dream, yet there is calculation; it seems to be an ordeal, yet there is beauty; it is everywhere imbued with pressure, with forces that threaten one

from all sides, and there is very little freedom, yet there is also a singular freedom of thought and conception. One sees all this both demonstrated by the poem and also portrayed in it. These are the constituents of one's existence in the world, taken in their purest form, abstracted and rearranged, as though by a painter like Klee -- so that one is presented with a richly colored miniature with huge resonance. Yet the substance is nonetheless in some ways dire -- subterranean confinement, unfreedom -- the curious extrusion by which one forces oneself into the light (shall we call this education?), the squeezing out -- out of an intolerably narrow circumstance -- of some substance of life -- hope, beauty, joy. *As through a needle's eye* might be a fitting epigraph:

Here, above,
Cracks in the buildings are filled with battered moonlight.
The whole shadow of Man is only as big as his hat.
It lies at his feet like a circle for a doll to stand on,
And makes an inverted pin, the point magnetized to the moon.
He does not see the moon; he observes only her vast properties,
Feeling the queer light on his hands, neither warm nor cold,
Of a temperature impossible to record in thermometers.

But when the Man-Moth
Pays his rare, although occasional, visits to the surface,
The moon looks rather different to him. He emerges
From an opening under the edge of one of the sidewalks
And nervously begins to scale the faces of the buildings.
He thinks the moon is a small hole at the top of the sky,
Proving the sky quite useless for protection.
He trembles, but must investigate as high as he can climb.

Indeed, think of all that climbing and clambering -- it is an obstacle course poem. Perhaps this factor provides a kind of athletic equivalent of the moral concern of Zukofsky: one must strive and strive, though not necessarily to impart a truth. Strive then for what? We might note in passing that the poem is wonderfully asexual, as though out of J.M. Barrie, and this for the purpose of foregrounding something more fundamental

than sex. Aside from survival itself, this can be only one thing, and it is that thing that distances the work from the prophetic tone of Zukoksky -- the allure of the beautiful itself, the desire of the eye to see, to see the world as it is, in its light of whatever kind, in its elemental splendor, reflected in the composed luminosity of the comprehending gaze. For the source of light here, as in all art, is not only the sun or moon -- it is the eye itself. It is this eye that wants not only to see but to be itself a source of light, illuminating its own world even as it receives it from the world -- this is the poem's deeper protagonist, this seeing eye which sees splendor and is itself a source of it. Moreover, to see is to know; this is in fact the first requirement in the effort to understand one's social and historical predicament.

We note that it is not only sexuality that is omitted from the piece but money as well. The combination of these two omissions produces the fairy tale-like atmosphere. There is difficulty, and striving of a rather athletic kind, as though out of a story book adventure, and there is a vague threat too, yet all in an atmosphere of harmlessness -- he "falls back scared but quite unhurt." Later, of course, there is the deadly third rail, but this real and specific danger, like the dangers in so many fairy tales, is held in abeyance by the protagonist's own wariness -- that special wariness, characteristic of fairy tales, that is the present form of one's future blessedness (for that is the hidden subject of all fairy tales, compressed Gnostic myths that offer hidden ways out of the lower world of childhood in which one is trapped and the still lower one of adulthood to which one is fated for a certain purgatorial duration), that special wariness with which one proceeds through the haunted forest where objects loom with strange power and an hallucinatory vividness, themselves the talismans of unknown forces.

They are unknown indeed even to the author herself who cannot foresee history any more than anyone else. There is a blank, therefore, the blank into which everyone stares, the mirror-like eye which gives back every gaze, and which can itself be truly seen by only the man-moth's eye, which, since it is "all pupil" takes in so much, indeed almost the entire night itself. Though even he has his limits of perception, which accounts for his carefulness. The simple inability to know the future, therefore, pushes one to try to know this thing one is in the midst of -- this place, this time, with all their strange material embodiments, uncanny if looked at rightly, however daily and familiar -- the monstrous buildings, the underground train, the whole and wholly unnatural milieu to which one yet has become accustomed by an historical necessity. What else would one do? Light out for the territory? And we notice now (having alluded in passing to a text like *Huckleberry Finn*, with its background myth of Nature) that there are so few natural images in the poem; in addition, there is no real horizon. Except, of course, for the one inside the man-moth's eye. That, quite simply, is the inner horizon of desire, dream, hope and fear and then also of temporality, and thus, ultimately, of history. That one image -- that "haired horizon," as it is called -- indeed is a clue to the whole poem -- the man-moth includes history, encompasses it, indeed is a material embodiment of it, and his eye, the window of his soul perhaps, also is. Indeed in this close-up image, this inner horizon expands to include everything that includes it; it is a part grown suddenly larger than any whole that might contain it. Is this not his problem? To have something inside of you that yet is bigger than you are is a great strain. And so he is always in danger of being split apart by the very forces that comprise him -- even though he is so calm and silent and, as it were, methodical, an Everyman going about his business.

Aside from this inner horizon of history there is, as we have said, no other horizon in the piece. It is a landscape with no boundary, no edge, no outside, and to some extent resembles that amusing picture by Escher where stairways descend from ceilings and doors open out of floors. There is nowhere else to go, and so we see one of those rare pieces of modern writing in which, as in Kafka, the *elsewhere* is excluded. We are trapped, and below ground. One does not need to be claustrophobic to feel this entrapment almost viscerally, and then the need to master it somehow, even if actual escape is impossible. Perhaps the beautiful images become the more terrible, therefore, because of the hopeless context in which we find them, which indeed they create. And if the piece has something of the fairy tale about it we realize, too, that these are often frightening in their own way.

Nonetheless to see is to know. In addition, to see the beautiful in something is in some way to contain it, to encompass it, and yet also to be affected by it, to be open to it and susceptible to it. One sees things and the qualities of things, is an impressed and vulnerable substance, and yet this very susceptibility requires an underlying energy. It is not the projection of a conceptual schema and it is not the mere and passive reception of data; it is a kind of moving outward and meeting, which involves the summoning of an always latent power. Vision itself is a power of desire, certainly, it is a power to meet the energies of the world itself and *is* one of these energies. Therefore, the luminosity which suffuses the poem, investing it with its painterly, exquisite, and yet nocturnal splendor, is the luminosity of the eye itself in its seeing and knowing. This is the power that sustains the Man-Moth and prevents him from being a wholly pathetic figure.

There is in the piece perhaps a certain buried allusion to the myth of Icarus. The man-moth is a kind of embodiment of this figure, a very late one, of course, and hence presented with inevitable irony (and yet, is it really inevitable?) who ventures upward out of the labyrinthine environment to which he seems to be condemned. The historical lateness of the poem is seen also in the slightly comic overtones; and in the discreet element of slapstick: he falls back scared but quite unhurt. And so he is a bit Chaplinesque. The work is a fragment of the myth of Icarus rewritten through the lens which recorded *City Lights*. Yet although he does not escape this labyrinth (this would be impossible, since it is now coextensive with the world) there is a line of flight anyway. And so the idea of escape is nonetheless present, as well as that of the aesthetic transcendence we were speaking of. The poem is written in such a way -- using such an array of novel images -- that these two things become one: the captive escapes not by eluding the structures that hold him in but by seeing them differently, and in such a way that new possibilities of thought, feeling, indeed of life, are opened up inside of them.

Of course it has to be said that the labyrinth does not really want to imprison you. Indeed it will take you wherever you want to go (or just about) and at top speed, and we see this happening before our very eyes even before the poem is concluded. Yet you must travel in the way that it decides. In typical American fashion, speed and efficiency are at your service; you are free to go whenever and wherever you like, but only by means of the routes already marked out and only according to the established schedule. We might wonder whether freedom is actually possible at all? If so, how can it be characterized? Yet with this question we must return to the beginning of the poem and read it in more detail.

In the first stanza we are introduced to an eerie world -- silent, seemingly depopulated -- with the terse phrase “here, above.” The punctuation itself indicates an opposition -- here, above, as opposed to “there, below,” and also suggests an emphasis, which is audible in the rhythm of the phrase -- phonology and rhetoric fusing in a single indicative enunciation that is intended to disclose an entire state of affairs as briefly as possible. Though it is complex and extensive, it can yet be encompassed by this one indexical -- “here” -- and the oppositional “above,” and then the resonant pause between them and immediately after. It is as if everything is said in these two words, and the entire world and all human possibilities encompassed by the four terms -- here, there, above, below. Outside of these oppositions, there is nothing. We have already mentioned the absence of horizons, and it is probably a commonplace to say that the poem creates its own world. It is a tightly contained one, surely, and from the very first implicitly exclusive. One realizes that this exclusion is also implied in the biblical *fiat lux* as well, which can perhaps be vaguely felt behind this seemingly casual opening. For every creation myth is an exclusion myth too: the myth explains and exemplifies creativity as such, but also seeks to contain it, moving it along accepted channels and tracks, like the rails that appear later in the poem.

This silent lunar world, a lunar city as it were, would appear to be entirely artificial, being characterized simply by buildings. It is like some science fiction scenarios where humanity has developed to such a point that nature has been entirely eliminated, and in which landscapes consist of artificial structures entirely. As a boy I used to read comic books that were conceived along these lines, yet it is an old idea, that of the city which contains the entirety of human endeavor. And so implicitly in the poem

we are placed in an end time. History is concluded, or at any rate has reached a point where there is only the human and then beyond that or other than that -- what? Here is where the poem's exclusiveness is relevant, since it leads one to ask what else there is or might be besides this place with its battered structures, its *above* and *below*, if nature is no more or is a mere footnote. Besides being urban it is also in poor condition; the buildings are full of cracks, and though it is the moonlight and not they which are battered, one has the impression of ruins of some sort, more or less deserted and lit by the moon and its eerie light. It reminds one of the great short story by Elizabeth Bowen "Fabulous Kore" in which the bombed out buildings of the London blitz are seen on a very clear night of unearthly bluish moonlight.[4] This story, like many modern short stories, is concerned with atmosphere and psychological resonance. Bishop's poem is a kind of modern parable or fairy tale, almost like the sketches Ernst Bloch wrote to amuse himself and to encapsulate his sense of the perennial and subterranean working of desire, hope, and creativity in human culture and history, and it has points in common, too, with Benjamin's brief parable about the Angelus Novus. As such, it is not concerned with psychology or atmosphere but operates by means of striking images and a densely figurative landscape that, as is the case with many fairy tales, is itself a kind of actor in the narrative, being instinct with its own powers. Here they are largely powers which have been given it by historical material processes, since they are all artificial constructions, although there is a signal exception to this at the conclusion, as we will see.

Who lives here in this moonlit world? We have mentioned the depopulated feeling of the opening, and yet it must be acknowledged that it is populated by a single creature -- Man, capitalized, and so suggesting the collective abstraction. Yet this Man,

illuminated so harshly by the moonlight, casts a shadow no bigger than his own hat. From a distance he looks like an inverted pin, magnetically attracted to the moon. “The shadow of Man” is itself a striking phrase, and one looks around for clues to interpret it. For one thing, it clearly echoes the abstract rhetoric of some poetry, especially Marxist-oriented work, of the 30’s. There, not infrequently, the human abstract would be mentioned or perhaps apostrophized in similarly symbolic landscapes. The visual equivalent can be seen in any number of pieces of public art of the time, certainly in the more stylistically conservative Soviet art, but also in similar work produced by WPA artists.[3] In this system of pictorialization, simplified human forms struggle forward in obviously allegorical landscapes, sunrises streaming around them through beaming clouds; it is understood that they stride forward into History, which they shape for themselves, aided by the industrial tools they carry in their hands, or by the machinery that accompanies them as a sort of adjunct. If they are single, they are never singular but typical, and if multiple, they are a uniform host, advancing against all opposition. It is easy to be ironic with regard to such work. It seems corny and hopelessly out of date; its earnestness is the very antithesis of contemporary sophistication, and one can easily imagine it ripe for parody well before the time of the poem’s composition. The single phrase, therefore, responds to an entire tradition which was perhaps still barely alive at the time (or only recently deceased). The line in itself, taken as a whole, has a clear deflationary intent. This becomes apparent in its second half, after the caesura that divides it neatly in the middle: we have first the dramatic build-up, “The whole shadow of Man...” and then the ironic conclusion:...”is only as big as his hat.” And of course in the very next line this is

compared to a circle for a doll to stand in. The author wishes to place a distance between her poem and this tradition.

But for what reason? Merely because she recognized its silliness? This would be an easy answer. I have to confess, though, that I do not find this tradition, in either writing or visual art, silly but rather moving and invigorating, and so I am naturally moved to look for another answer. It could be also that the poem, if not the poet, carries on a silent conversation with this tradition of overtly revolutionary art, though in a covert way -- by means of an underground approach appropriate to a work whose protagonist is a sort of underground man, insofar as he is a man at all. At the same time, if there is a deflating intent, it may be because what is to be deflated is something inherently imposing, even intimidating, and it must be chopped down to size before it can be accommodated in the poem's miniature world. For what, after all, is the shadow of Man, quite apart from its suggested connection to modern political art? Taken in itself, it refers to History, that thing which shadows the human and which is cut to human shape in only an approximate sense, or which indeed might be thought the antithesis of the human, a dark double trailing unavoidably. Or it may be that the shadow of man is the more limited and yet more general idea of culture; there is indeed a sense of diminishment in the whole first stanza, for this Man, who, capitalized, must contain multitudes, is as thin as a stick pin and casts barely a shadow, and though obscurely drawn to the moon in magnetic fashion seems yet incapable of seeing it. Standing at the center of what is a kind of stage set flooded with unnatural light, he is diminished, exposed, and entirely minor; and so indeed the vision of humanity is at almost the opposite ideological pole from the revolutionary imagination we were mentioning before. It has more in common with

Becket, perhaps, or with some figures in Kafka. Yet the poem is far more rational than is the work of those two writers, and so its presentation of the historical situation is more precise. The moon, for instance, is not merely a stage prop. It is the harsh light of an historical crisis of some kind which places humans in a situation of having to face their own finitude with nothing outside or beyond this theatre of world space now shrunk very small and fittingly represented by something at an opposite remove, aesthetically, from the historical panoramas of Romantic tradition or of the early 20th century period of revolution. And yet the scene marks a turning point anyway, illuminated by this unflattering, uncanny light, which is neither warm nor cold. The reason for this is that it is the result of the total material development of the social world to that point, consisting therefore of infrastructure, means of communication and production, institutions of all kinds -- things which are neither abstract nor concrete in the simple sense but a complicated blend and which, analogously, are neither human nor nonhuman. They are the nonhuman means by which the human realizes itself; the nonhuman medium in which the human lives. These are the vast properties the moon of historical crisis and reflection reveals in the world, reveals as being the world.

The temperature of these entities is, of course, the index of their activity, yet what runs them, the current that goes through them is only one thing -- the total quantitative abstraction of money, something whose temperature cannot be measured at all. (And so we see it was an illusion: there is money in the poem after all.) The poem's figures are actually quite precise in their presentation of the modern neo-capitalist situation. And its compression is amazing. Indeed so is its tone. How should one describe it? We have mentioned Kafka and Beckett, but in reality the voice, if you will, that we hear in the

piece is more remarkable than anything we find in their work. Is it a modern poem? Post-modern? For all the contraction of the human that it envisions, there is a strange humor and cheerfulness. Is it merely the evasiveness of a writer who is unquestionably a bourgeois poet after all? Perhaps it is instead a retreat from the abstractions of the allegorizing medium and style and of what is perhaps its most characteristic subject – history itself -- and an embracing of the human in its direct vulnerability, its exposure to these circumstances, its finitude.

The tone of the poem -- genial, humorous, acknowledging dangers, though still with understatement, serious and thoughtful and yet not pompous or exaggerated -- is that of a civilized person who assumes that communication yet remains possible regardless of how unnatural the human context may be or may become. She avoids the modern trap of the lugubrious and the post-modern one of the cynical and retains amidst her fabulous and painterly phantasmagoria the civility which allows for a social connection, which may be slight and yet profound at once, as it typically is -- thinning often enough to mere observation, as when we simply watch each other on the street and take a certain enjoyment in that alone or blossoming to intense mutual aid in extreme circumstances. And yet is not sustaining mutuality impossible without this attunement, and is not the expression of this attunement in writing -- in the very and peculiar light of this ambience, this attitude, in the modulations of this amused, reflective, and rueful voice -- the means by which it transcends most of what has been written in its time, the means by which it enacts its special distinction as a work of more than art, but a human and moral document as well as a fabulous picture?

In the second stanza the poem moves into a different phase, for the actual protagonist, the man-moth, makes his appearance. He is almost immediately placed in opposition to Man, for not only is he mostly a denizen of the “below,” as Man is of the “above,” but also we are told that the moon “looks rather different to him.” He finds its light not merely uncanny but in some ways attractive, and quite literally so. It is a kind of lure drawing him out of his normal underground dwelling. Actually this clear opposition between man and man-moth is a detail in the poem that is easy to overlook; in fact, the very existence of man, as a type of creature distinct from man-moth, tends to blur in the mind when one is away from the piece. One recalls mainly the latter, most likely because of the title and because the rest of the poem is focused on him so much. And in fact Man is mentioned only twice at the beginning and then in a parenthesis in stanza three when he skeptically regards, apparently from ground level, the man-moth’s attempts to climb up toward the moon. And yet even though it is easy to forget, this opposition is important for the poem.

What is the relationship between them? We’ve mentioned the buried mythical motif of Icarus. But we see another in this opposition, that is, the myth of Psyche. Moths are also, of course, a traditional metaphor for the soul, just as butterflies are, and their attraction to flames is a stock metaphor for erotic attraction, particularly of some ill-advised sort. In the myth, Psyche, the beautiful maiden, must undergo various trials and cross various thresholds in order to be united at last with her true love Eros or Cupid. Though Man cannot represent the physical man or body, being too reduced and stick-like for that, he might instead be seen as political and historical Man, who cannot orient himself in the world even though he is a virtual compass needle, because he cannot see it.

Only the tear from the eye of that creature who is all eye can help him to do so. In a strange revision of Emerson, the transparent eyeball is found not on a hillside but underground, where it yet awaits the vision that would justify its very existence. Moreover, as we have pointed out, this eye comprises an entire night in itself, and so it is a special alternative horizon, like a crystal ball, once again to be understood as an historical field of forces which include the knowledge that can come only from venture and from the crossing of thresholds, whether they be striking and spectacular ones or secret and inscrutable. This crossing and this potential seeing, therefore, are the actual result of the man-moth's errand -- the soul's difficult venture among the passageways which are those of culture, history, and dream. Is it enough to guide historical Man, who seems rather passive, inert, and stilled? Who knows? But for the man-moth himself it is almost too much. Despite the fact that he is not injured in any way he seems to be a creature trembling on the verge of extinction or breakdown (and suicide is spoken of later, as we will see). Is almost too much, too much in fact? It would seem that the situation -- this world -- is nonetheless dealt with, held, albeit with difficulty, within the compass of the man-moth's fragile yet receptive existence. To a degree then it *is* mastered, that is to say, dealt with creatively and so rendered if not human then a part of human history. As such its result -- the draught of cool liquid, pure and sobering (perhaps a bit like the draught of water at the end of Frost's poem "Directive") can provide what nothing else can -- illumination, instruction, a map to upper and lower regions which might then be transformed from labyrinths into actual cities. There is no reason to mystify it; the cool and pure draught is quite simply knowledge undistorted by ideology or mystifications. It is not even necessarily art or The Poem. The man-moth does not need to be an artist; his

vocation is managing narrow straits, dealing with the burden of that effort to extrude oneself onto the light -- certainly a grotesque and yet apt metaphor for education of any kind. After this, it is the negotiating of passageways and the crossing of thresholds (the seemingly fateful, magical step into the subway car, for instance). This is the process -- bungling, sometimes comical, yet persistent and undissuadable -- of accumulated knowledge of whatever sort. Yet only this transforms concrete labyrinths into actual cities.

The man-moth himself cannot do this; everything about him is soft and delicate -- made for reception, flexibility, and sensitivity, not for action. By contrast, though, Man can do it, and this is the Marxist aspect of the poem, since, as a needle, he is made of steel --- though currently bewildered, apparently forlorn and exposed to the derisive murmurs of the stage set of history and to the empty spaces of the night, he is potentially strong, hard, and penetrating, a Man of Steel. Yet as a stick figure, he must put on more flesh and become something other than steel, that is to say, become entirely human. He must see and feel. If he is able to, then he can perhaps begin to understand the theatre in which, currently, he merely wonders about his existence, mutely puzzled. The limitation of this response --mute puzzlement -- and its gift to political reaction is the poem's accurate criticism of both Becket and Kafka, and of all their various imitators. Of course, it is not a Marxist poem after all, in any orthodox sense, but its evading of such orthodoxy is one of the ways that it *is* Marxist ultimately, and in a deeper sense -- through its creativity which yet also seeks and finds a civility and a rationality which refuse both preaching as well as counsels of despair.

LOVE LIES SLEEPING/THE TRAGEDY OF LABOR

With this beautiful piece we come to the edge of an aesthetic divide in Bishop's work, and it places us at the threshold of that portion of her poetry which is inspired by a more realistic observation. It is not that she will never employ the semi-allegorical mode again. In fact, what we have been attempting to elucidate is really a tendency, a position along a continuum, and not a fixed approach. Yet the tendency so far has been toward a somewhat abstract conception -- allegorical, emblematic, surrealist at times -- in which things stand for other things, and in which metaphor and conceit are pressed to sometimes exaggerated lengths in order to bring a novel perspective into view or to defeat the masses of clichés that swarm in the blank page. Yet even in this first volume, as we have mentioned, a change of orientation, analogous to a change of climate, is evident as we move into the second half. We encounter the concretely observed world in its specificity -- in its color, shape, and texture. Symbolic landscapes give way to actual landscapes. In fact, the patient description of a landscape, the landscape meditation, becomes one of her major genres, of which she will produce a brilliant baker's dozen through the remainder of her career. In this piece, we find what seems a kind of transition, a work balanced between these modes, incorporating both, perhaps uneasily, certainly surprisingly.

It does, however, seem mis-titled, perhaps as a calculated deception, like a magician misdirecting the audience's attention in order to make the unapparent appear --

rabbit or what have you. For I do not think it is really about love primarily, or perhaps it depends on what kind of love you are talking about. That is to say it has sometimes been read as a homoerotic piece, but I feel that there is little love in it at all, or if there is, it is more agape than eros.⁵ [see Crystal Bacon In Worcester 139]

The poem begins with a complicated conceit, and in the piece in general, metaphysical conceit and description jostle each other in the writing, balancing the work midway between the two.

Earliest morning, switching all the tracks
that cross the sky from cinder star to star,
 coupling the ends of streets
 to trains of light,

now draw us into daylight in our beds;
and clear away what presses on the brain:
 put out the neon shapes
 that float and swell and glare

down the gray avenue between the eyes
in pinks and yellows, letters and twitching signs.
 Hang-over moons, wane, wane!

[*Collected Poems* 16]

The initial metaphor is rather complicated and perhaps a bit confusing. The stars are cinders because they are fires on the point of going out, but, in a play on words -- in which cinder is also what is used to fill in the beds of railroad tracks -- one imagines the sky as a complex of train routes which the morning, by bringing the earth (and thus the streets) around into a new position, will bring into a new alignment with the trains of light that are just now showing themselves at the ends of these streets, perhaps like light at the end of a tunnel. It is therefore a complicated figure expressing the idea of realignment or re-orientation. We are moving into the more dynamic world of day after having spent time drifting, somewhat askew perhaps, in the world of night.

The world of night is oppressive, it “presses on the brain” and is characterized by “shapes/that float and swell and glare/down the gray avenue between the eyes/in pinks and yellows, letters and twitching signs.” We notice a number of characteristics in this description: a certain claustrophobic congestion and lack of spatial position -- the neon shapes float and swell but in no particular space, and though they have color, this is merely mentioned in a generic fashion -- pink, yellow -- with none of the painterly nuance and discrimination that distinguishes this poet’s work; it is as if this night world has visual characteristics without having any real space or light. It is instead a kind of continuum, an intensive continuum in which sense impressions, very much the decayed sense of empiricist theory, fuse and blend and blur and sometimes jostle each other associatively, so that letters and twitching signs are somehow brought together. We encounter a rebus effect, a world of images but with no space or light, combined, however, with pieces of language and the memory of “signs.” This last word can stand for anything, of course, though it probably refers to street signs. But in reality it is the allogical semiotic charge of dream, in which anything can become a sign, an obscure significance -- compelling, perhaps frightening, but opaque. Here, in this oppressive realm, everything is a hangover, a bleared trace or script of something else, and one would naturally be eager to get away from it. Therefore the last line should be understood as a kind of magus-like command, dispersing evil nocturnal influences: *begone*, it might easily say, *begone to make room for sight*.

And in the very next line we witness something remarkable -- the birth of sight, actually not sight exactly -- that will come later; rather, we are shown the things necessary for it: they are an “I”, that is, an individual subject; an act of seeing itself, “I

see”; and finally, though it is reported first, a means of giving direction and perspective to this, so that it can be organized and become a creative act as opposed to a mere continuum of activity. This is provided by the window. Therefore, in the rest of the poem -- at least until we get to the last third -- visibility and the discovery of the world by means of the eye will be the main subject.

It is a city poem, a morning cityscape. For this reason what is revealed is not merely nature -- though of course nature exists in the city as much as in the country -- but also the social life of humans and their relations with each other, at least by implication. In one continuous movement of perception extending over many lines the natural world is revealed in its light, color, and spatiality. It is seen not merely as an object or collection of objects but as a kind of whole, though not necessarily a completely organized totality in some metaphysical sense; activity, however, is not random and there is an implicit consistency and coherence to the way things go -- to the way a cloud of smoke moves through the sky, the way the light illuminates progressively greater areas of the streets and alleys, the way that water is cast upon the pavement by a municipal cleaning truck; the world is not random events nor is it a collection of discrete objects: it exhibits pattern, periodicity, ordinance and its own subtle gradations. It does not need to be seen as a whole, and may indeed be conceived as a shifting field of activity, yet it is not chaotic. In fact our vision itself is proof of this. We do not see in discontinuous spasmodic reactions to the supposed stimuli provided by the environment, but with and according to our own patterning and movement. Seeing is a searching and a searching out; it has a subtlety as well a kind of tactile nuance and is as much a type of listening as listening itself, as much a type of palpating as touch itself; moreover, it is not done by fiat, and we do not in fact

project arbitrary orders upon an amorphous mass. Rather, we see the light, but in seeing this light, we see in it and as it were according to it, and our vision is intimately mingled with it, threaded into it, through an involvement between our faculties and the light itself and the overall field of visibility as it is made apparent to us. **6 [Imitative]**

Seeing is a creativity and yet it is also a responding; our encompassing sensibility is a shaping and yet also a searching and a finding, and all three of these can only take place within the prior context of a donation -- the donation of the world to our eye and mind, of the light to all three, of ourselves to those elemental presences. This too is the subject of the poem, revealed in a quiet and methodical way that unfolds in a step by step progression of details.

The first dimension of reality to emerge is the visual itself and with it, though delayed by a telling interval, is color. This is wonderfully conveyed by the inspired comparison with the “chemical rock gardens” of crystals which at one time provided a sort of amusement for children; following this we find the movements of birds, sparrows. And then a new element is suddenly added: the boom of a cloud of smoke (from a factory, no doubt) fills in that aspect of the world we might refer to as suddenness, the sudden salient event, as distinguished from the gradations we have seen up to this point -- the infiltrating of light and color and depth of shading, the grain of viscosity as it blossoms and fills out, re-animating the visual field in a kind of fluid yet pointillist completion, like blood tinglingly refilling a limb fallen asleep. Yet now a sudden disjunction in the world is seen or, rather, heard, and so, along with this new aspect of surprise, we also witness the rebirth of disruptive noise, as opposed to the low continuous scratching of the sparrows.

As we move into the section dealing with the street sweeper, we encounter one further aspect -- that is, greater detail as the world begins to stand out more clearly in all its aspects. The wonderful comparison of the water's patterns to watermelon slices is only one instance of this observation. In this homely eccentric detail, in the fact of its being able to be noticed, the poem discloses its fundamental theme, which is disclosure as such, its results (in the medium of writing) and its implications in the context of ethical awareness. But we will return to this theme in a moment. Finally the last dimension of the world that we are shown is the overall dispersed clamor--undirected, unorganized, here represented by the common urban racket and even household racket of all one's neighbors getting up at once. Yet the encompassing sound of the world is a dimension too in its own right -- the vibratory signature of being, here represented by a small sample which yet completes the presentation of reality that we are given.

These dimensions, as we have called them, are not discrete. They partly imply each other, and we know that each example has more of the same behind it, that it comes forth to our attention out of the brimming reservoir of the world and that though we do not know in advance what other dawns will be like, we know they will have to have some things in common with this, that other colors will have something in common with these, other sounds with these sounds. And yet though this landscape is not a collection of discrete objects it yet does not conceal any underlying presence animating it.

The earth is the ultimate context of the colors that emerge, of the light and of the general clamor that rises from the whole town at the end of the poem. Yet this goes without saying. It is not true to say that the earth itself is revealed. Though unquestionably there and real, it remains always receding behind the various aspects

through which it is known and through which we encounter it. Perhaps this is in some ways tragic; there is a tragic limitation of our faculties and imagination; and perhaps if we could imagine it, then our future prospects on it, with regard to ecological sanity, would be that much brighter. The poem is silent about this ultimate dimension, and does not make efforts to push intuition further into the realm of the apparent, as though to seek out something deeper. For this piece, for this poet, what is real is there, apparent, and what is not apparent is not real. For her there is no great heart beating at the center of the morning landscape as there was for Wordsworth as he looked out over London from Westminster Bridge.

The poem, rather than leaping beyond, takes a different means of achieving fullness of vision: it keeps to its perspective, which is the perspective from this window. It is a perspective fully filled in, not merely sketched or suggested, presented in detail and with an ordering, as we have noted. By this means the impression of an entire life and way of life, a landscape and a world, is created, and not a mere snapshot which would show the visual look from a given vantage at a particular time and nothing more. The lapse of time contributes to this greater completeness also, of course, but the carefulness of the encompassing visual composition is also important. Without it there would be a lingering hint of the arbitrary adhering to anything mentioned; with it, however, there is a sense of necessity, not a causal necessity, but the necessity of common natural order, the necessity that requires me to see according to a given light in a certain way, even though the light is not the cause of my seeing as I do; the necessity that requires me to move in a certain way according to certain principles of kinetics and the like in order to get out of the path of a water truck, though the truck is not, strictly speaking, the cause of my agile

leap onto the sidewalk, anymore than this leap could be viewed as a spasmodic response to a mere stimulus. This encompassing sense of order permeates the world, -- even as any metaphysical “beyond” is rigorously absent, and so it is crucial for any representation that attempts to capture this world in something like its fullness. She is a rigorously atheistic poet, even more so than Stevens, since she banishes the very subject of religion as being beside the point, that is, beside any conceivably rational point, and so beneath the dignity of writing.

What is the dignity of writing? Does it exist, and is it an important consideration? This issue, which we cannot take up now, leads nonetheless to the second means by which she avoids the trivial and achieves the equivalent of depth without the myths of depth. This second means is the social: by this means the poem moves decisively beyond the dangers of the pictorial. Thus the first moment that makes us aware of the specifically social comes when the speaker hears the “boom” from a nearby factory and sees the cloud of smoke which she describes with deceptive beauty as “an exploding ball of blossom.” Yet she immediately corrects the superficiality of this aesthetic impression by considering the real meaning of such an event. What is it really like to work in such a place? And even if one escapes death or mutilation, how does it affect one’s life at the deepest level? And so, with profound insight and empathy (for she certainly had no experience of factory work herself), she allows us to feel the visceral response that haunts the worker even when asleep:

(And all the employees who work in plants
where such a sound says “Danger,” or once said “Death,”
turn in their sleep and feel
the short hairs bristling

on backs of necks.)

Beyond that the clearest instance of the social appears in the poem's last section with the introduction of eros, in a remarkable stylistic shift: here the poem reverts somewhat to its opening metaphysical style, an obviously non-realist conceit, indeed a very strained one, extended through several stanzas, and so the verbal style -- and thus the specific impress and register of reality in the language -- changes to accommodate this. It is perhaps a problematic moment in an otherwise stylistically faultless poem, yet its purpose is to shift the focus away from objects, sense impressions and the like, and toward relationships and the powers that are expressed through them. For this reason, the poem begins to take account of eros after all, here represented by cupids, the "queer cupids of all persons getting up." Thus if agape remains the poem's focus, as I believe it does, then it is in the form of the speaker's compassion for the erotic sufferings of her neighbors.

The cupids may be queer, that is, strange, but the sudden shift of thought is even stranger; the idea is prompted by hearing the sounds of all these people rising and getting ready to go to work. Yet as they work, they carry with them, in the poet's fancy, these strange imp-like spirits of erotic desire, almost like cartoon thought balloons. And there is something cartoon-like about the poet's imagination as she asks them to go easy, as it were, on their poor mortal slaves: 'scourge them...helium.' Is it actually a weightless burden, however, as a helium balloon would be? The poet's tone seeks to lighten the weight that she sees imposed, yet she knows that these mortals, besides having to toil and labor all day, must also have added to their burdens that of unsatisfied desire. In the lines quoted above the "whose" is the cupids and the "they" is their mortal victims. It is our

destiny to have left over at the end of the day an entire banquet, as it were, of unsatisfied desires which are then the evening meal of those demons within us that prompt us to do something -- anything? -- to change this frustrating situation. Is it perhaps hopeless and is this the reason for the poet's choosing this stereotyped means of expression? As though to suggest the situation can never change anymore than these symbols and emblems have (and that then, for this reason, it is best to make light of it)?

Finally in the last section, we are given the reason why she asks these phantasms of frustrated desire to have mercy on their toiling mortal victims. After all the work, there is only death. Every day someone dies, every morning finds any number of them with head not at all where it should be but hanging down in such an inconvenient and uncomfortable angle that indicates they have gone over to the other side. And yet the poem, entirely concrete and worldly, gives us clearly to understand that there is no other side. There is a tragedy here then in the poem's last few lines -- the common one of living all one's life under the burden of labor, never having one's deepest human desires for love and the erotic fulfilled, and then dying. This is itself a tragedy and no less so for being so common. Is it possible to know one's social situation, and that this is one's most likely lot in life? And if it is possible, how often does it occur? The eyes of the dead or perhaps dying man see the city inverted and distorted we are told, but as though to correct an oversight she amends that immediately to "distorted and revealed." The real nature of the social world can only be seen by looking at it upside down; for the images one is provided with by that social world itself -- are they perhaps the neon shapes, the twitching signs, and hang-over moons ? -- are deliberate obfuscations; and reversing what one has been told is a surer way of getting at the truth.

In a final cruel irony, the dying man, on the point of leaving his life, might suddenly see all the ways he had been cheated all along during it. But it seems to me that there is something brutally unceremonious about this whole obituary we are given here at the poem's conclusion. And its purpose is to direct our attention not to death and dying but toward the living, just as Christ himself says in the Gospels that we should do, and the final line that seems almost an after thought, is really the main point after all -- it is not skepticism about whether the dead or dying man sees but an entirely disabused skepticism that can tell us that most of the living do not.

Readers especially attuned to sexist usage will no doubt have noticed that I have been writing "he" all the time in referring to the poem's working class protagonists; and this is because the poet herself does. It seems especially odd in those stanzas that deal with eros and its constant pestering of all those simply trying to get their day's work done:

Queer cupids of all persons getting up,
 whose evening meal they will prepare all day,
 you will dine well
 on his heart, on his, and his...

Why not on hers? Women fall in love too, presumably, or at least have erotic cravings; in addition they also work. And then certainly they also die. To some extent this choice on the poet's part to use only the male pronoun is inexplicable. Perhaps she simply liked the way it sounded, or it may have been entirely reflexive, and so she didn't really notice (though this seems unlikely). But I believe it can also be said that it was one way she had of emphasizing the class of persons she was especially concerned with. For after all, the president of Chase Manhattan also goes to work (presumably) and may even have his or

her own unsatisfied desires lurking somewhere, desires that even that long anticipated excursion to Bangkok, Rio, or Shanghai could not satisfy (if such can be imagined, and of course it can). But everyone knows that the most frustrated and distorted lives are among the working class. It is they who at the earliest hour of the morning take their shirt down from the thread-like clothesline and prepare to go to work in the dangerous factory where the next boom might indeed mean death, it is they who drive the water wagon, too, at that early hour, so that the envoys of capitalist transactions might have a somewhat neater passage; and their morning rituals of preparation -- quite different from Stevens' woman in her sunny chair -- at times almost a kind of steeling of oneself, as one prepares to ascend yet again the high iron of the immense city in one's job as a construction worker-- are entirely "expected" as the poem decorously puts it, that is to say, repetitive and unending. Certainly women too have worked in factories and driven trucks (and rather fewer worked construction) and we also know that their activities along these lines had reached a kind of high point right at around the time of the poem's composition, when so many men had been drafted for the war.

Yet it is also the case that generally it has been men who have done these dangerous occupations in our society, and the poem in an effort at fullness of characterization relies also to a degree on a typicality of representation, presenting in this regard what is most often the case and true by and large and omitting, for the sake of conciseness, important exceptions. Yet it may be a flaw and a miscalculation anyway. However this may be, it really only serves to point out that its focus in fact is on labor; it is not love that lies sleeping, it is labor that does (because it is exhausted) or if it is love it

is something that so many factors in the poem seem deliberately to exclude --- it is the difficult task of agape rather than easy one of eros.

For labor is a type of love as well, the most fundamental in fact, since no one could exist without it. Indeed it may be far more important. The world is in fact a world of work after all; it is not a world of cupids and their arrows; and it is labor that creates not only the physical structure of society and its commerce but also the culture that imbues and animates it. We are conditioned to see eros as fundamental, commanding, all powerful; and yet it may be trivial in a way, and modern culture may be distorted by giving it too much importance. To work and to see are the most important things, to participate in the world by means of intelligent effort, to know it and one's place in it through the lessons of experience, the acquisition of knowledge, and the insight prompted by trial and error, failure and success -- to see, to know, to do, and thus to know what one is and where one is. These are the great things, and yet the tragedy of labor lies in the fact that only the burdens are available to these working people and none of the fulfillments, only effort but no enjoyment, only repetition but no learning, only risk but no freedom in which risk might be consciously undertaken, indeed no consciousness, for instead of education one is given the bleary images of advertising and entertainment. As the man-moth presented us with the comic or ironic predicament of the modern artist struggling to find a means of escape from the labyrinth, this poem presents the tragic predicament of working people. To do so it moves away from the abstract and semi-allegorical mode of the earlier pieces, and instead we find a new attunement to the physical world, and to the circumstantial, to the things of the world and to the others who are also there.

The amazing eye that seeks and finds beauty, that is itself a luminosity and seeks the further sources of it abroad and outside itself, continues to seek and to find; the poet's painterly vocation is in no way diminished; indeed we might see it as achieving its absolute fulfillment no longer in a conceptual phantasmagoria allied somewhat to traditional allegory, gnostic speculation, or to Coleridge's fancy, but instead in searching carefully the very grain and fabric of existence in the world; yet as it does so it must encounter a place, a specific place, and then naturally the others there. It attempts to see them in the full reality of their existence, both the beauty that it finds in it and the tragic limitations as well. To consider this existence in its complexity requires also that we think of that profound connection which can sometimes come to exist between individuals; and then the relations between them in their social context and finally the relation of the human world itself to the ecological world. In the second half of our study, therefore, these themes -- the landscape and the other -- will be pursued; a fourth theme, self-reflection and self- placement, her civilized equivalent of autobiography, will occupy the conclusion, along with the last issue following from that, which we have already mentioned, what I have called, the dignity of writing.

NOTES

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PART TWO

CHAPTER THREE THE WORLD AS IT IS

FLORIDA

At times, in her attempt to overcome the conceited style of her earlier work she hits upon approaches which are so direct that the critic is momentarily thrown off balance. This I believe is true not only of this poem "Florida" but also of the next two we will look at -- the first a lesser piece that I include merely because I think it fills out the picture of her poetry more fully, the second, "The Fish," one of her great pieces. But to return to the one at hand, "Florida": Thomas Travisano observes: "'Florida' is a brilliant poem, teeming with extraordinary detail, but it does not seek dramatic culmination." And he continues, citing David Kalston, "...There is some notion of neat and total structure which the critic expects and imposes, but which the poem subverts." [Travisano 62]

Actually we have in this poem, despite its outward prettiness a picture of a landscape of death. More specifically, it is a landscape that, rather than presenting a unified whole, and a unifying substance, seems to be composed of gaps, fissures, and

those holes of nothingness that Sartre speaks of at a somewhat fanciful moment in *Being and Nothingness*. Here, unlike so often in romantic landscape -- and we will pursue comparisons with Wordsworth shortly, though in connection with a different piece -- the whole is not quite a Whole, and there is no suggestion of a numinous presence felt just past the surface of the world and beyond its individual details. We find instead, in post-modern fashion, a rhizome landscape, one that wanders and extends itself here and there without a center. And perhaps this is a better way of putting the issue: instead of a stable and self-present world, we find one permeated with absences, a sponge-like landscape that is riddled with gaps and that does not really compose itself around a central perspective. Yet such gaps, fissures, absences, or what-have-you cannot help but suggest other things to humans, who are naturally preoccupied with their own needs; they cannot help but suggest lack and deprivation of various kinds and ultimately death itself.

The state with the prettiest name,
 The state that floats in brackish water,
 Held together by mangrove roots
 That bear while living oysters in clusters
 And when dead strew white swamps with skeletons...

[32]

Where is Being, to begin with, in this piece? Is it to be grasped anywhere? In Hart Crane's tropics, existence is a furnace -- complete, enclosing, and not at all difficult to locate; indeed it is a prison: its light is everywhere and inescapable and has the physical presence of an oppressive weight. Frightening in its larger patterns, the physical world is also repellent in its individual details -- the minatory tarantula, the repulsive air plant, the royal palm whose trunk, in a grotesque comparison, appears elephantine, until sight reaches an apogee of the illuminated and weightless fronds that move in a pure

realm of light, as though to disclose, with a tantalizing grace, the Absolute. And yet one is stuck at the foot of the tree, staring upward from the middle of the hot jungle where one's deathward breath is sealed.

With this piece by Bishop we are presented with something different. As I have already suggested, it would seem to be a classic instance -- a prefiguration -- of what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as the rhizome.^[1] Here the individual elements do not amount to dimensions discovered, which in turn lead on from themselves to further depths, further extensions, within those dimensions, as a line of perspective, for example, disclosed by converging sight rays, leads on toward a potentially infinite realm of further depths. Instead, discrete items mesh together in clusters with some kind of association -- in space, in time, or merely in appearance -- linking them. Limited and provisional coherence takes the place of a single unifying concept. There is perhaps a loss in some sense, but on the other hand something else is gained. For instance, the landscape recycles itself continually, water seeps through it, and gives it a ceaseless though minimal vitality that yet does not suggest mysterious depths or heights at any point; sponge-like it cannot be penetrated, dominated, or subdued by any one concept or image but instead is full of surprising details, each standing out sharply from its context, seeming for the moment -- as we read and comprehend -- to break free of any context. In this way the grip of the encompassing whole upon the particulars is loosened; the particulars live on their own, and yet they still exist somewhere, as the title itself reminds us. The landscape is filled by both the vital and the contingent; it is porous to begin with and is always somewhat other than it is. There are events and networks of events that work at different speeds. As we have noted, water moves through it all, but slowly; we also know of

hurricanes, though these are not mentioned; there is the cycle of the tides and, set over that, the varying life spans and inherent rhythms of the different creatures described. It is like an orchestra where each group of instruments plays in a different tempo and time signature. Here it is the rhythm and the entire course of life filled in that creates a range of impressions by means of networks of details. The process of observation remains and some fanciful description, yet it creates a landscape that yet does not have a center. Here death and life move together, and it is possible to speak of either only to a degree. There is no supervening mood, though, and so we cannot make the landscape a direct reflection of mind. The eye rather moves among it, discovering times that overlap.

The poem is written, in fact, according to what we might call the time of observation, neither too fast nor too slow. Yet still it pursues the luminous moment of salience (to borrow a word from A.R. Ammons)[2] [see his brilliant poem saliences] which can be composed of the immemorial times of the roots, of the webs and nets and networks, of the numerous unassimilated events, (including the crazy birds screeching out of nowhere). If there is a liberation from structure, it is not by means of the infinite play of signifiers, but rather, and perhaps astonishingly, by light itself, by light that strikes in a moment and bathes events with an aura of primordial wonder. It is a poem composed of luminous moments -- none too brief nor too long; for if the former, the mind cannot adjust to what is revealed, and therefore cannot assimilate it, either to the concepts of thought or to the forms of art; if too long, it interposes too many of its own devices -- these very concepts and forms -- or perhaps courts a species of empirical mysticism, as in Zen. In this account, this critical pacing is seen in the slow progression from back water to coast. Perception and writing, moving from one thing to another, take an andante

pace and adopt a careful tone that does not claim too much, but is filled instead with a wondering -- curious, amused, appreciative, questioning, seeming to say *How can this be?*

This is perhaps an elusive aspect of the poem. It is conveyed only so far as is consistent with a modern civilized tone, which must always allow for the divergence of the real from what is said, thought, or claimed, and, therefore, for irony. Yet this irony can come in many forms and degrees. Here, and elsewhere in her work, it takes the form of a requisite modesty, a recognition that one might be mistaken, such as might be thought incumbent on anyone working in language (given what it is, what we are, and what the world is). This is to bring artistic expression within the bounds of a fundamental civility while yet still striving to deal with the real in the deepest way possible.

What is the nature of decadence, in point of fact? Perhaps we might say that it is a state of affairs in which parts dominate over the whole, which yet they are not free of. The reason for this loosening is a kind of fatigue. Yet in nature, the liberation of the parts ultimately is not in itself decadence: it is splendor and raiment -- the panoply of the landscape itself, and of any landscape. There is luminosity to this place, and it seems strange that the sun is not mentioned. But then that would suggest a center, and though the sun is a source, it is not a center, but is rather a recurrence, a periodicity. The entire landscape, therefore, is one of networks, porousness, periodicity, and an inherent alternating of the luminous and the recessive. This results, here and in general, in the peculiar phenomena of *raiment* -- the clothing of nature is seen as clothing, rather than mistaken as substance, and this is conveyed brilliantly by the image of the flag of calico:

The tropical rain comes down
To freshen the tide-looped strings of fading shells:
Job's Tear, the Chinese Alphabet, the scarce Junonia,
parti-colored pectins and Ladies' Ears,

arranged as on a gray rag of rotted calico,
the buried Indian Princess's skirt...

Here we have bits and pieces, yet the whole is like this too, and, though it is, there yet is no feeling that it is in any way insufficient. The epistemological result of this perception is the ad hoc comparison, the off hand analogy: nature is a loose mesh, composed of fragments, that are remnants and *incipits* at once. Therefore the eye that sees the parallel, and the near parallel, moves on to the next element that presents itself, and provisional comparisons and observations fill out an impressionistic web through which time and the world move, flowing through and on, rather than a system of elaborated correspondences that attempts to capture a *substance* in some definitive way.

Yet a lack of structure has its negative side too -- in human affairs at least, if not in nature: careless, corrupt, eaten away from within, the "careless corrupt state" exemplifies social backwardness and decay: duplicity and malignant divisions permeate the social world. Here too one is presented with a landscape of death, though one may realize this only somewhat after one has read the poem, for when the porous is the result of fatigue, human fatigue, one then finds decadence per se. Fatigue, let us observe, is a negative type of memory, but it is not a haunting. Haunting is historical; it is part of culture, even if the personal culture of an isolated individual. It is therefore part of the collective trauma, whereas what we have here is carelessness, a lack of culture, an amnesia, which yet is oppressed in a sheer materiality, in an indolence that comes from having no way to define goals for one's efforts; in decadence a horizon is lacking, and there is no way to resist the evil of existence itself. For this very reason its sure mark historically is squalid or flamboyant vice, for in these there is a wallowing in the least cultivated impulses --

lust, gluttony, inebriation, visceral rage; despite self-indulgence, joy is quite absent because joy requires recognition of the good, and in addition must be shared if not with actual others then with the ghostly and watchful others whom we call ideals, and hence with the future. Rather than joy there is satiation; rather than friendship, association, with betrayal and slander closely following; against wrongs or imagined wrongs, which are just as dire in this context, there is not so much anger, which too requires a concept of the good as opposed to mere self-interest, but instead that narrow-eyed taking aim which can be seen in so many bullies and tough guys, closely allied with both contempt and vainglory; rather than valor, there is intrigue, and the ritualized obscenity of torture is the favored means of punishment. We find as well indolence and ignorance.

Perhaps these observations, prompted by nothing other than the poem's later section, are unfair in a way, for it is an old story: that of northerners coming to a southern region to complain about the laziness, shiftlessness, or what-have-you of the inhabitants, who seem mired in carelessness and corruption: thus the gringo to Mexico; the German to Italy; the Englishman to anywhere; here, the new England blue stocking to Florida, where, rocking in the boat of her small trust fund, she notes with dismay the ugly whites, as well as the disorganized Blacks who are too far apart from each other. And yet they are indeed ugly, and, prejudice and trust fund aside, she may have had a point. Here the poem falls back slightly on the *paysage moralise*, tipping back as it were into the earlier allegorically inflected mode we are familiar with in her work. And yet the historical had been there all along, as history always is (for writing, for the writer). It began with the name itself (as indeed it so often does) seen in the title, meditated in the first line. It is a moment reminiscent of "The Map," yet here there is no day-dreaming, rather than this,

we find the historical which overshadowed the former poem and elements of which are seen clearly now in this one.

LITTLE EXERCISE/ TO BE AT HOME IN THE WORLD

Is it possible to live in the world as more than just a visitor? Is it possible to be here, noting the look and feel of things, perhaps with wonder, perhaps with dismay, but still noting, reflecting on light and space, on color and the disposition of objects, like an alien observer; noting too, and with dismay, the unsatisfactory social relations which so often obtain among these others who inhabit this same remarkable, though strange, place. And they do seem to inhabit it, do they not? They do seem to get along there; even when they are visibly dispossessed, they seem somehow at home. Would it be possible to be like that too? one thinks.

Or is it just a reflection of our own callousness that we think this of them, namely, that they are at home, whereas we are not? But we are not callous surely. If we were, we would not write, or at least read, such fine poems. Is it perhaps something else then, something more deeply ingrained and inveterate -- the primordial self-absorption of the individual, regardless of his or her particular character? For this is based on something far deeper than character; it is based on the body itself, on the fundamental fact that one is who and what one is -- is a person of exactly this size, shape, and condition, this age and gender, with these various medical determinations and not others,

and that there is an unbridgeable gap between one such body, inhabited by however fine a character, and another, another, say, who happens to be ill or in pain or dying. It is they, and it isn't you.

Among other things, this fact seems to limit our ability to ascribe to others the same unease we also have -- we have surely no difficulty in recognizing that they too are pained by a or b, though certainly there are some who do have such a difficulty. Yet we sensibly relegate such persons to a special category. Nonetheless, it remains a fact that I do not feel the other's anxiety; I feel only my own. I do not feel their confusion, but only mine, nor their fear and uncertainty about the future. It is only my own that is real to me; while that of the others is imputed to them by my reason, and entertained within me by my imagination, but nothing more. And that is all there is to it. And this basic fact about existence, our existence in the world, imposing so many other additional limitations upon us, causes us to imagine that it is only we who suffer, or at least in this particular way -- this feeling of being out of place, this sense of being not really present, of being not really meant to be here, of being in fact afraid of it, though afraid of what specifically we cannot always say. We have these anxieties (we might as well use this cliché expression) while yet acknowledging that, yes, of course, they, these others, do as well, of course, and yes of course even if these others are these others with these brown or black skins or creased red necks and dirty clothes and shirttails hanging out and always accompanied by ill-tempered dogs and always by so many children -- how do they ever manage it? one thinks.... And then: I guess they get used to it somehow, one thinks a moment later. And that is the crucial moment. And it passes almost imperceptibly and does not even need the final speculative and -- let us now admit it -- callous phrase. Since in this passage of time

and thought -- not very much thought and not very much time, scarcely an instant -- a threshold has been crossed. But it is a threshold of a special kind.

To encounter the other, to see them, is to be subject to a moment of hesitation. One is brought up short in one's confidence, one's projects and even in one's perceptions. What is it, actually, to see a face? Levinas claims that it is not an object to be perceived,[3] like other objects, but surely this idea is wrong. Is not my face in fact part of the world? And if it is not, then where is it, in fact? And what is not part of the world, since there is only one world, is nowhere, and what is nowhere, we recall from Hobbes, is nothing. Certainly my face *is* an object, indeed it is sometimes a target. Nonetheless, it is not just any object. For this object has the power to contest with the others, even at a distance, and in fact only then and there, the contentious space of social encounter, a primordial site of interaction leading to both public and private spheres.

At those moments -- and they are always moments -- the ownership of space that emanates outward, as though in concentric circles, from the competent body, is altered or dissolved, trembles quaking briefly the way that lamplight trembles when the shade is touched. And the ownership -- the "my-own-ness" of the "I, I am here" -- is contested. It is immediately reestablished, but yet it is contested. It is in this way that human beings initially affect each other, at least for the most part.

In the passage of thought we have recorded above, however, there is an opposite process, and an entirely different threshold is transgressed: it is that by which we refortify the fundamental indifference with which every individual is armored in advance. With age comes indifference, someone said to me once, thinking the comment a great piece of wisdom. It is quite true, yet it does not require age. Or rather there is a continual ageing, a

continuous ongoing senescence, happening within us always, and it is expressed -- among other ways -- in this assumption, mutely aligned with our own existential uneasiness, that the others are different from us and somehow at home in their lives in a way that we are not. (This, combined with boredom, a certain basic appetency, and the punctuating weathers of hope and fear, comprises the perennial background of human mentality.)

Yet if it is morally suspect to assume an at-oneness with the world -- as we might call it -- in others, perhaps, paradoxically, there is a virtue in trying to achieve that very feeling for oneself. If one could feel this way -- at home in the world, at ease in it -- what would it be like? We would be happy, healthy, strong, brave, and good, would we not? We would realize ourselves in a way we have never yet been able to, or, more accurately, we would possess that calm and hopeful disposition that is the most effective starting point for such efforts. We would be free in the basic sense of being free of fear -- or relatively so -- and free of anxiety, the diluted fear that erodes from within one's capacity for enjoyment, rest, and work.

And yet certainly an underlying implication of the previous poem, "Florida," for all its splendor -- and of the other poems we have looked at, too, for all of theirs -- is that one oneself does not feel this way and cannot, or not exactly. One is there, a visitor from elsewhere, always a bit uneasy, watching, listening, taking note, anxiously looking out for hazards and for the unforeseen. And yet, as we have pointed out, this is not unusual; it is rather the common lot and is also, according to existential philosophy, inseparable from being a conscious "I" in the first place. Still, to overcome the common lot, even in a small and subtle way, is to raise things upward, if only just a bit. Therefore one might ask, Is there any way to be at home in the world, despite the world's hazards?

This short poem, it seems to me, is about this question. I believe it is often overlooked among her works in favor of larger and more famous pieces, but I think it is irresistible in the beauty and freshness of its perceptions, and important beyond its apparent scope for the way it brings this particular issue into focus. There is no answer to our question, of course: and the poem itself does not try to provide one; indeed it is almost mute, in fact, having only two sounds, that of a tropical storm and that of the poet herself speaking. In speaking she describes, and in a sense narrates, since the descriptions taken together mark out the barest outline of a story: a large storm has come up, and someone has taken shelter in an out of the way spot. There, although it is a potentially dangerous storm, they remain perfectly safe. In fact, they sleep undisturbed through the whole thing.

We notice that the piece is constructed as a kind of thought experiment: “think of...think of...” it says repeatedly. And this implies that the scenario projected may not be the only possible course of events, perhaps not even the most likely. Still, it is possible, and the series of wonderfully clear and original descriptions, each a scene in itself, creates a convincingly realistic “world”. The progression of the stanzas, in fact, is a bit like a sequence of establishing shots in a film; we move from place to place as a distinct location is filled in for us. We are introduced not merely to a place but to the overall character of the life there and the basic conditions in which it is lived -- in this case a tropical or sub-tropical context with its characteristic sights. We understand intuitively something about the kinds of daily life that take place there, even at the most fundamental level. Reading, therefore, we begin to find ourselves even just a little bit at home, and it is in part the clear style which allows this, and in a way that the highly conceited and

conceptual style--- abstract, fantastic and exaggerated -- of something like the “Man-Moth” cannot do. That is not surprising, since it is the purpose of that style to make things strange, a goal that is actually her purpose so often. Here in this piece, though, it is not; here she has an opposite intention, not exactly to render familiar, for the familiar is always the enemy of any art, as being akin to habit, but to reconcile the mind to the strangeness of the world, despite the feeling of how unlikely it all is, unlikely being her word for our fundamental existential mystery in the late poem “The Waiting Room.”

Think of the storm roaming the sky uneasily

The first shot, then, is of the overcast sky itself -- a powerful tropical storm is developing with its restlessly increasing winds. There is a wonderful mimetic quality in the sound pattern of this first line, with the phrase “storm roaming” creating an effective yet subdued rumble; combined with this bass effect, there is the line’s opening, with its sharp sounding imperative “Think of ...,” employed as though to startle one slightly, and then the conclusion with its almost graceful arabesque of internal off-rhymes wavering within the phrase “...the sky uneasily.” *Think of the storm roaming the sky uneasily.*

Rereading this line, I think of the subdued but nervous rumble that precedes the fortissimo chords in the opening bars of Debussy’s “What the West Wind Saw.” Sheer impressionism, of course, on all our parts -- his, hers, and mine (with the academic reader perhaps scandalized by the last). Yet impressionism is important to the theme, for the only way to reconcile oneself to the world is through impressions -- the vague yet encompassing feelings that are more than and less than emotions, more than and less than specific sensations, akin to mood yet bearing an attachment, however complex or tenuous, to an object or to an array of objects. It is the impression that attunes one in a way more

encompassing than specific data, in a way more concrete, more living, than rational thought. One lives by impressions which encompass and transcend specific sensation, idea, emotion, mood, and reason and which, though rooted in the present, encompass also the past through memory and touch upon the future through presentiment. (There is in fact a presentiment implied in this very line. For one knows a storm is coming, and its likely magnitude, by an encompassing feeling which does not disregard data but gathers it up in a larger and more active context, a climate of attunement). The poem demonstrates even by its sound and then through subtle gradations, by its mood, a way of being reconciled with the world, of feeling more at home in it, more connected to it and less estranged from it, despite its various storms. This is the underlying ethical power of what we sometimes dismissively refer to as impressionism (explored more elaborately, of course, by Wallace Stevens). And yet this initial mood cannot be all. The eye must participate as well as the ear.

Think of how they must look now, the mangrove keys
 lying out there unresponsive to the lightning
 in dark, coarse-fibered families...

We are drawn to the writing by the attractiveness of the scene set before us, its atmosphere in which we intuit a certain wild energy and a refreshment of perception itself. Things become new, even if only by a kind of adjustment of mood and tonus, as after a nap, let us say: there, as here, the difference might be subtle, yet it is also total and colors our view of everything. The poem attempts to seduce us back to the world as though after an estrangement; it attempts this through the simple attractiveness of the scenes and by means of a relatively clear, chaste, and accessible style that becomes a sort of window through which we view these word-scapes that are instantly more than words but things

and these things that are more than things but an entire existence, an existence that is not so much placed before us as placed in a new light -- that of promise -- and so made to beckon to us.

Here, as in cinema, a painterly inspiration becomes a means of enabling the viewer to move closer, in their response, to what is presented, to the world itself; in its very light and clarity, it becomes an enticement and as it were a kind of door through which the viewer moves as though into a new and brighter existence. Here one is drawn to the simple story, the naturally attractive image of the conclusion: How fine to escape disaster so neatly and so easily, one thinks. It seems almost like an image from *Huckleberry Finn*. Would that things could always be like this. The image becomes a kind of utopian example, penetrating all the more deeply into the imagination because of its simplicity and humbleness. We glimpse in it a fragment of the movie of our own experience that we would like to play over and over again, in which we live as we would like to and are the people that we have always dreamed of being. In this episode, we see the effortless escape from danger, and yet perhaps it is not even that grave a danger, for this storm is not a hurricane certainly. It seems to merely freshen things in the sultry landscape and that word, in fact, is actually used.

There is something benign about the whole world of the poem, though not absolutely so, and as long as there are elemental powers -- wind and water and waves -- there are accidents. Yet these powers are also the embodiments of vitality, and the poem is perhaps ultimately about this -- the capacity of life to regenerate itself, to renew itself and to be renewed by nourishment and energy that it draws from its surroundings, as well as from happy accidents. The poem, therefore, is in part about the continual youthfulness

that enables one to remain in a sense untouched by negative experience without, however, retreating into fantasy constructions. This is an inner resilience and flexibility that keeps one's life continually a new thing in one's hands.

Is there such a thing as the power of hope? And then is there perhaps another power beyond that, the power of luck? Is it possible to summon them out of the depths of one's anxiety, like a dream from the darkness of one's bed as one wraps oneself up at night and says to oneself, "It will be all right. The money will be there, the tests will be negative, the job people will call."? Does one believe in magic, we moderns and post-moderns? Is it possible that there is a power, not of positive thinking perhaps, but of that subtle attunement -- powerful, yet elusive -- that we call mood? The poem is an exercise in summoning positive moods. It is a little exercise, as its title indicates, because there are always more reasons for despair, and reasons are ultimately stronger than moods. It is for reasons, as a result of reasons, that one dies; they are noted on a death certificate. Yet it is by moods and by impressions that one lives, and lives most fully.

Having said that, we still have not established the real potential efficacy of mood. If we could control it, what might be possible? Is it for nothing, for instance, that pharmaceutical companies have invested so much in the development of mood-altering drugs of increasingly sophisticated kinds? This places the question in a broad political context, and brings forward a dystopian specter -- that of the psychiatric control of populations. Yet drawing back from such issues, there is still the question, hidden deeply within the life of each individual, of the degree to which one is capable of summoning a greater health, a greater strength and well-being out of oneself or at least of achieving within one's life a greater resiliency in the world, a lesser level of anxiety in it, and a

greater level of happiness. Even if we must live under the regime of the iceberg, it might still be possible to do it. A small fragment of a utopian impulse is preserved in the possibility of these hopeful moods. The poem conveys this in its repetition of that one word, think. By this means it creates an appealing and subtly hopeful image in the mind: appealing for its beauty and atmosphere, its discreet and yet engaging cinema; hopeful because of its modest and yet resonant recommendation -- imagine this, think.

THE FISH/A BODY WITH ORGANS

Powers of hope and of fear are resident within a body. A landscape -- charged with hope and fear, with opportunities and dangers -- is a landscape of bodies, populated by them. And yet, what is a body? In this poem we find a detailed investigation into this question. It is striking, actually, the degree to which it is an unusual piece in the context of modern poetry, for just this reason; for although modern poetry -- and especially in the United States -- has been anxious to proclaim the importance of the physical life, to emphasize the creaturely, the biological, the sexual, it yet has done little to illuminate these dimensions in detail, but has remained most often on the level of hortatory generality. Here, though, we have something different. The poem has been widely commented on.

Thomas Travisano says the following:

Bishop's fish...is understood by analogy to people, but its essential difference is respected. Minute observation of the fish is precisely

What Bishop devotes before she can uncover its meaning....Fish are alien,
And a hero among fish should remain in its element. But the "victory"

that fills up "the little rented boat", and the rainbow that spreads...
could not come from recognizing this alienness. With alienness comes
The recognition of kinship, and this recognition depends on fictions
That uncover in the fish a human analogy. Ruskin rightly insisted
That "the spirit of truth must guide us in some sort, even in our enjoyment
Of fallacy." [69]

Others such as David Kalstone have placed the process of seeing itself in the
foreground.

The poem is filled with the strain of seeing – not just the unrelenting
pressure of making similes to "capture" the fish, but the fact that the
similes themselves involve flawed instruments of vision, stained
wallpaper, scratched isinglass, tarnished tinfoil. This is why, on some
readings, the poem has the air of summoning up a creature from the
speaker's own inner depths – the surviving nonhuman resources of an
earlier creation, glimpsed painfully through the depredations of time and
the various frail instruments we devise, historically, to see them. The
"victory" that fills up the little rented boat is one that more than
grammatically belongs to both sides. Like "Roosters," though without its
bitterness and fear, the poem taps and identifies nonhuman sources of
human energies. What makes it different from [Marianne] Moore's animal
poems is its interest in the difficulties of locating and accepting such
energies. [87]

For Bonnie Costello the fish momentarily appears as a Christ symbol, but then
before long the actual reasserts itself in her gaze and her reading joins Kalstone's in
placing the emphasis on seeing itself, with, in her case, a special emphasis on time:

By the midpoint of the poem] [t]he poet does not simply relinquish her
desire for imaginative contact with the fish. But her attention shifts from
spatial to historical imagining. History is no longer distant and figurative
but "still attached" in the form of "five old pieces of fish-line, / or four and
a wire leader / ... with all five big hooks / grown firmly in his mouth."
Five wounds on a fish make him a Christ figure, but the epiphany he
brings the poet has nothing otherworldly about it. The domestic images at
the beginning of the poem, followed by the battered body of the fish,
evoke the poet's unconscious life, the uncanny return of the repressed
which can "cut so badly." But Bishop can entertain such self-reflection
now within the larger context of the life of nature and the beholder's

tentative grasp of it. She no longer has to define a discrete interior space through dream or symbolic abstraction in order to explore her subjectivity; she has brought the self out of nocturnal seclusion and explored its relation to everything under the sun.

There is also a pervasive but ambiguous sexual quality to the fish. An untamable, corporeal energy violates the domestic world of wallpaper and roses. The fish, a he, hangs like a giant phallus, yet as the beholder imagines his interior, its "pink swim-bladder / like a big peony,? He takes on a female aspect. Indeed, the hooks in his mouth suggest that phallic aggression is the fisherman's (woman this time) part. This hermaphroditic fish challenges the conventional hierarchical antithesis of female nature and male culture. Here there is no struggle, and the victory is not exclusive.

For Bishop, nature mastered as static knowledge is a fish out of water. Its beauty and venerability belong to time. Yet it can be entertained, with a certain humility and lightness (such as simile registers), for its figurative possibilities. The poet "stared and stared" even though the fish did not return her stare. Her imagination transforms a "pool of bilge / where oil had spread a rainbow" into an ecstatic (and perhaps deliberately excessive) "rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!" Such an epiphany, set as it is in the highly ephemeral space of the rented boat with its rusted engine, must be of mortality. The grotesque is the style of mortality not because it makes us turn away in horror but because it challenges the rigid frames of thought and perception through which we attempt to master life. All the conceptual and emotional contradictions that emerge within the description of the fish point to the letting go. [*Questions of Mastery* 63-64]

The question that seems to animate all these readings is something like *Why show me this?*

Perhaps we can shed some light on this question.

The speaker is alone, strangely, in a boat, evidently fishing, though we are shown none of the activity of fishing. These two facts are in themselves striking and significant, and they contribute to the strange atmosphere of the poem, an eeriness of mood entirely different from what is most often found in other accounts of this and similar activities. One might think of Hemingway in prose; and in verse, of a range of American writers such as Richard Hugo or James Dickey; and in British poetry, Ted Hughes with his great

sequence *River*. Or else one might go back in time and consider Thoreau's fishing episode in *Walden*. In all of these examples, context is usually more important than the act of hauling the fish out of the water. And the portrayal of this context is used to address an array of complex themes -- social issues or psychological ones by means of dialogue (and silence) between characters, the portrayal of nature in the depiction of setting, and so forth. But all of this is omitted in this piece by Elizabeth Bishop. Even the description of "the little rented boat" is very brief and comes only at the end.

She wants to draw our attention entirely to the fish itself in its physical existence; the focus of the poem is on that to the exclusion of almost anything else. We will return to this "almost" later; for now, let us begin to consider her stylistic work and actual practice.

The poem is written in a three stress accentual line which has the slight effect of giving a discreet emphasis to individual details or words without necessarily bringing excessive prominence to them (such as end rhyme might do, or even internal rhyme, which she employs elsewhere but which here is strictly avoided). Instead, rather like a pianist skillfully highlighting certain notes and softening others, the disposition of the poet's language presses gently or more strongly upon selected items without becoming overly emphatic; when the three accent line threatens to become too artificial, a certain prosaic plainness is brought in, or a flexible enjambment. In addition, the piece has no stanza divisions, and this serves to create an uninterrupted flow of observation. The overall effect is of a continuous unfolding in which each detail is equally important. In fact, because she is describing a body, any hierarchical organization -- such as one might easily find even in the description of a landscape, in which objects are ranged according to near and far, and the like -- would be particularly inappropriate; rather, the body is a

whole, and a continuous whole; all of its parts are equally important in the sense of being all equally alive and intrinsic to it.

As we said before, there is a strange isolation in the poem, and a silence as well; there is no one and nothing else around, so that the catching of this fish and then the observation of it become a sort of strange encounter with something uncanny about it. Perhaps the word tremendous in the first line carries a bit of its old meaning here -- fear inducing, or more literally, causing to tremble. And if the fish is all that large and heavy (he is “a grunting weight”) then perhaps she is trembling a bit with the effort to hold him up to view. They are connected, therefore, these two creatures, by a thin line and by a strange tension, partly physical and partly mental; the physical connection is, of course, this line itself, almost invisible, as fishing lines are, and yet very strong, and then, too, the tension of this weight and this strain. This is, of course, the metaphor. But to what does it refer? What is the exact nature of their physical connection? They are both biological creatures and yet they come from different worlds: she hails him up half way, but only half way, out of his; and she, bending down as one imagines, leans partway out of hers. We see dramatized in this scene -- almost emblematically portrayed -- something of the relationship between the human and its biological context. On the face of it, the emphasis would seem to be on the natural world as it is, independent of us, since the fish is strange, rather ugly, and something quite foreign. After all, there is relatively little resemblance between a person and a fish and a huge evolutionary gap. Still, there is the line and the tension that animates it; there is a pull of some kind -- consisting of both fascination and repulsion. And yet she does not seem to have any impulse to get rid of him that quickly. Instead, she lingers closely, watching, observing. Here, however, we touch upon a second

connection -- that of mind; this connection is, of course, strictly one way; the fish has none really, instead it has reflexes of a kind, or a sort of dim blundering awareness nicely illustrated in the section that describes its eye and its working:

I looked into his eyes
 Which were far larger than mine
 But shallower, and yellowed,
 The irises backed and packed
 With tarnished tinfoil
 Seen through the lenses
 Of old scratched isinglass.
 They shifted a little, but not
 To return my stare.
 --- It was more like the tipping
 Of an object toward the light.

The situation of mind in the world is thus peculiar; the body finds analogues of itself everywhere: as strange as he is in so many ways, the fish breathes in and out as we do, even though its source of oxygen is different from ours; even in the limbs of insects or in those of plants with their architecture, we find analogues of our organs and vital process, and of our physical structure itself even in machines. The mind, though, by contrast, is alone -- and here we see one reason for the isolation and silence. Yet though it is alone, it meets, repeatedly, drastically reduced versions of itself -- here in the eye of a fish, which, though larger than a human eye, and in some ways similar, is yet also so much less, and by an incomparable degree. There is nothing behind it, or if there is, it is only life itself. And yet isn't that enough? Perhaps this question hangs over the first part of the poem, nowhere stated nor even clearly broached, yet dimly implied in the speaker's actions. What is she looking for, after all? Hasn't she ever seen a fish before? Yet her search is for something that can definitively connect her to this other creature.

Not to it specifically, of course, but to the world. What can relieve the terrible isolation of the mind, if anything?

Thoreau, famously, notoriously, seems to have needed little more than the connection -- austere, thin, ultimately obscure -- with the natural world itself and with its creatures. But most people are not like that. The natural course is to turn to someone, to something like oneself, to another human; and if we revert to the opening lines, we see a bareness and a lack of circumstantial detail that here again subtly moves the writing in the direction of the symbolic, despite the careful description, at times rather clinical. It is not a strong movement but rather a gentle pressure that prevents a mere literalism from gaining the upper hand. In this case it takes the form of a slight suggestion of sexual symbolism. The fish, of course, is an ancient phallic symbol to begin with; here we see it half in and half out of the water, a position that might be described as exposed, or with some similar word. There is the feeling of a divulging, and a strange intimacy. Even the fact that he does not fight, which she emphasizes, seems to suggest this. And then there is the odd word “grunting”, with its coarse overtones but unmistakable suggestion; though on one level it merely conveys the size, and perhaps frightening size, of this fish, on another it carries an unmistakable reference. Though encounters with the male in its most basic dimensions would seem to have had little place in her life, we see that it yet lingered in her mind to a degree. And yet the allegorical suggestion is not really sexual in any ordinary way; it conveys rather a kind of tarrying near to the sources of power, a lingering within their precinct and vicinity, and yet it could not be seen as in any way a communion. There is a continuous keeping of distance, after all, through the whole poem and no desire to unite with nature, the fish or, indeed, by extension, the male. The poem

is not in any way mythologizing, therefore, and it evades all ideas of instinct, sexual or otherwise. It replaces mythology with observation. And yet there is still the line, the physical connection -- a specific connection written by evolutionary biology, and seen, felt, heard even, in this one grotesquely human sound.

In this action then, too, we see also the more troubled and enigmatic connection of mind, of observation. This power does have the last word, in fact, or almost the last (we will need to make a qualification at the end), and so it remains a poem of humanism very broadly defined. The power of mind, of empirical observation, of a pure undiluted and undistorted observation -- undiluted by fear, undistorted by ideology or desire -- controls the shape and progress of the poem. It cannot be denied, like the progress of science itself, which it in some way recapitulates in miniature. And, therefore, we move back to a more distanced pictorial description; there is a pulling back, a focusing, and a clarifying:

Here and there
His brown skin hung in strips
Like ancient wallpaper,
And its pattern of darker brown
Was like wallpaper,
Shapes like full-blown roses
Stained and lost through age.

There is the initial encounter with nature, in which it speaks to us with a quasi-human voice and in which we feel some sort of uncanny pull -- partly inherent curiosity, partly an archaic affinity that resonates for us, however obscurely, and in which we sense traces even of our current life, even traces of our life we do not directly experience -- as for this author the male -- but which nonetheless are present as part of a generalized inheritance, unnamable in any complete sense and yet unavoidable. The initial phase of scientific investigation must follow -- the clear objectification of the thing, the construction of it as

an object in a field of inquiry. Yet this involves excursions of the mind away from the object per se into a network, a tracery, rapidly sketched, revised even as quickly, of comparisons, analogies, not pursued as keys, as in archaic thought, but grasped temporarily as provisional handholds on the object, since this object, though already “objectified” can remain in focus only with difficulty -- not because of the distraction, so to speak, of this very tracery, this heuristic process, but because of the object’s tendency to sink back into the encompassing field that it emerged from, like a fish back into the water. However empiricist one might be, it is evident that the order of things is not evident.

Yet at the same time it is not entirely obscure either, and there is such a thing as noticing, the coming to light of the salient. Thus we see comparisons -- with wall paper, with roses, with water stains, with rosettes -- intermingled with direct empirical observation -- there are sea lice, lime, barnacles, green weed. Knowledge is a complex intermingling of capacities, a braiding of incommensurable functions, and this is the whole problem. It is an imagining, and not merely an observing:

I thought of the coarse white flesh
 Packed in like feathers,
 The big bones and the little bones,
 The dramatic reds and blacks
 Of his shiny entrails,
 And the pink swim-bladder
 Like a big peony.

Here the mind moves into the object not by looking at it but by moving into its own continuity of conception and imagination. And yet it is certainly true that a body, though one, is not indivisible: and so the observer discovers organs. She does not cut open the fish but merely imagines the internal organs; she does not need to murder to dissect but

knows without dissection. Certainly this means that she remembers; that is to say, she has seen gutted fish before and she knows what is inside them. She assumes that this one must be like that too. This means two things: first, she does not try any quasi-vitalist identification with the animal, feeling into it, identifying with it, and the like; the poem remains completely rational. It is, for example, a visually bright poem, presided over by an implied bright sun. It is the sun of a summer day, but it is also the sun of a pure and entirely human rationality. To know the world and the creatures in it does not always require dissection, and hence destruction, but it never requires mysticism, which is not knowledge at all. Second, she yet sees it; she is not merely recollecting, further she is not merely classifying according to general characteristics. To recollect salient features and match them with a present instance is not exactly mere classification but it is not close observation either. And to merely recollect with, let us say, only a cursory glance at the present instance would be little more than a kind of sorting, and if extended in time -- with the elaborated detail that we see -- a sort of peculiar daydreaming, as though a man, seeing a beautiful woman, should immediately forget about her and go off into a reverie about one of his past loves.

This last observation brings forth a peculiar fact: that there is something akin between sorting and reverie: a recollection of distinctive features based on past experience -- briefer in the first instance, longer in the second -- combined with only superficial attention to the present; and this is combined, in the case of reverie, with a distinctive and supervening mood. She is not classifying the fish scientifically, as a marine biologist might if he were checking species distribution; nor is she merely sorting the fish ("throw all bass into this cooler, all perch into that one") as a fisherman might;

nor is she merely daydreaming about fish. And yet, with respect to this last point, we have to recall that she does not cut it open -- she visualizes the entrails but does not see them, yet they do not seem any different in the way they are presented from the things she does see -- its eyes, its jaw, and so forth. To move with no special transition between these two realms means only one thing: her knowledge, which is very specific, and presented in very pictorial and vivid ways, does not rely on visual data alone. It never departs from the object -- the poem is a strenuous, exhaustive, and exhilarating demonstration of attentiveness; and she does not attempt to become one with the object mystically -- the poem is rational and, if we may say so, modern; yet it goes beyond mere observation in the sense that it does not rely merely on data; it moves past discrete data to grasp a living whole, though it can do this only gradually, in a temporal unfolding.

As it does this, however, it departs from observation and moves into recognition. Now the only thing that can be recognized is something already known in some way; there is no sense in which this particular fish was known to her (it is not Moby Dick), and so therefore she recognizes a generality, a type, that is to say, a natural kind and its essence. In fact, this recognition of natural kind actually occurs quite early; by the line "I thought of the coarse white flesh" she is already "seeing" the entrails she cannot actually see. And yet, at the same time, this in no way precludes observation, for she moves back onto the plane of direct seeing repeatedly after that, and even drops to the level of observing, noting mere accidental data -- things that do not have any intrinsic connection at all with the fish but merely happen to be there -- the hook in its jaw with weeds and line trailing. Is it the idea of a fish that she sees? Certainly not. She sees a fish, handles it, and so forth. But what is seeing and what is knowledge? Can it be thought of as

categorizing, and hence as measuring or at least estimating; can it be thought of as sorting, and therefore as computation? And if one entertains the notion of essence and kind, does one lose sight of the specific and circumstantial? The poem is an act of knowing which moves beyond these problems, leaving them behind. It does it, strangely enough, by its focus on organs and body parts. For it is the parts, the organs that fill out the whole, the type, and give it its specific life.

As we know, in classical thought, and then later in medieval philosophy, a thing was defined according to some idea of its essential nature. The philosopher, the wise man, was he who had insight into the true essences of things, whether they be natural creatures, nature considered as a whole, humans themselves, or actions. Indeed, in Stoic philosophy, correct action and correct living is that which lies in accordance with the essential nature of men and of things. Politics likewise must be organized with this in mind. Medieval philosophy is to a large degree an attempt to combine this classical idea of natural essences (and the natural rights and duties that went with it) with the rationalized mysticism derived from neo-Platonism and the Christian ethical teachings simultaneously. And yet the gradual development of what Whitehead calls the “mathematical sciences of nature” leads, in the 17th century, to a gradual abandonment of the very idea of natural essences, at least as regards nature itself, though it was still retained with respect to human beings, as well as with regard to their social arrangements. Thus, though there could be a Newton, he could still reserve space in his mind for mystical ideas, and there could certainly still be a King with his divine right. Has this process of gradual and progressive de-essentializing been pushed to its limit? Such that now there is not even

Man? Yet the discourse of essences did not merely vanish; it was replaced by one of powers and forces.

The ultimate version of this with respect to nature, is evolutionary biology. Yet evolution proceeds not merely by powers and forces but by statistical factors -- a numerical calculation of the likelihood that given types of genes will be passed down, given the basic conditions extant in an environment over a period of time. It is not only powers that we see in such a view but the absence of powers -- an organism's *inability* to find food in a given environment, its *inability* to survive and to reproduce, the slight genetic differences which favor, *ever* so slightly, a different organism in that same environment, though it too, in point of fact, may not fare any better with regard to survival and reproduction nine times out of ten or indeed nine times out of ten to the third, fourth, or fifth powers. The true powers of evolution are thus not merely genes; they are rather absences, lacks, negations, failures; they are numbers and statistical averages, which are not biological entities at all.

Yet when we regard actual creatures we *do* see powers, and also essences; that is, we see forms -- the form of a fish, the essential form which Brancusi's genius defines for us in his elegant wedge-like oval of stone, polished and repolished, in which we see the essence of that marine creature that slices its way through the water so swiftly, seemingly without overt motion, let alone effort. Those lines, are they not the essence of fish, that movement frozen motionless in the stone, yet active still, poised in its invisible water directly before us, the mottled light and liquid play of the water, also somehow present in the greenish tint of the stone itself. When we look at the world, we see these essences, which phenomenology attempts to locate and to define. And yet at the same time we

encounter still a third factor -- power, force, movement. Thus: statistics, the mathematical calculation of trends and likelihood; also power, force, movement, and periodicity; finally, shape, form, essence, appearance. In the midst of all this, where is the individual entity -- the fish?

The same set of considerations applies to the individual organs -- each has a form, a shape -- heart, bladder, stomach; and yet also an organ is a power, a function. It must do something or various things. In addition, it belongs to a whole creature which yet, though capable of various activities -- swimming, leaping, eating, mating -- has no necessary power in relation to its environment. Its fit there is very loose, as James might say, and it is helpless in the contingency of its existence in the world, while yet being instinct with the fury of order, of form, and of animate power in the restricted economy of its life. This is the simultaneous beauty and terror of organic existence, its splendor and its fragility at once, its complex internal relation to larger patterns of evolutionary biology and the like in terms of both form and function and yet its absolute non-relation to anything outside of itself in terms of its concrete individual existence. The fact that the poem can make use of the power of visualization in a way that it cannot make use of -- let us say, statistics or other abstractions -- is the real reason that it might be desirable to imagine oneself as a body without organs, though Deleuze and Guattari might not agree; because this visualizing of a form is, quite simply, the power of creativity, and it is the one power we have which enables us to imagine, and hence shape, ourselves somewhat independently of the causal networks of nature, which our specific organs are instances of as both cause and effect.

One way that we can shape ourselves free, so to speak, is through ethics; ethics come in many shapes and sizes -- Stoic, Christian, Buddhist, Existentialist. Perhaps there is an element of all in the poem, which, in its conclusion, disdains victory (something which, at the time of its composition -- during or shortly after the Second World War -- was either earnestly sought with unprecedented effort or else lauded to the skies with unprecedented fanfare) and which sees in the little rented boat leaking and filling with its gasoline veil the tawdriness of the machinery of dominance, and perhaps of everything as self-serving as catching (for oneself), seizing (for oneself) -- whether it be fish, the day, the capitalist fortune, the one that got away, or what-have-you. In the poem's loneliness, in the speaker's isolation with this strange fellow creature with whom she has nothing in common, there is a sudden space that opens: it makes room for the gesture of non-possession, non-assertion, non-knowledge -- *Let it be, Let it go*, it seems to say. These three are not the powers by which civilization moves forward, but they are perhaps among the virtues by which it can avoid sliding back into the technologically empowered barbarism that had just concluded the year before the volume's publication.

In these three poems we have attempted to show the author's relationship to the world in one of its phases. What we might think of them as the initial excursion of her genius into the physical aspect of existence as such, the natural world as it is, independent of human intervention. In a landscape, in a natural creature viewed as an exemplum of organic existence itself, in one's self seen as a resident of this natural context, this landscape with these creatures, though here, on this point -- the self in its self-relation, its freedom of self-determination and its fated mortality in the world -- she will naturally

have much more to say. But such a complex subject can be broached only by degrees, and as it were layer by layer.

CAPE BRETON/ HOLISM

This piece is certainly one of her most beautiful poems, though it is one that is easy to overlook among the more immediately striking ones that make up her work. Yet it is also one of her most profound meditations, a work of great power and almost tactile solidity. If it is easily overlooked, it is not easily forgotten once read and properly considered. It is her most clearly Wordsworthian piece, a meditation upon place and topography and the relation of these to the forms of human existence which develop in and among them. We must place it in contrast to two other poems we have already looked at, "Florida" -- to which it contrasts in obvious and less than obvious ways and yet also to "Love Lies Sleeping". In those pieces we noticed a distinctly modern sense of landscape. In "Florida," we saw, rather than the massive substance so plainly evident in Wordsworth, the rhizome, the porous land eaten through and honey-combed with absence; perhaps we might view it as a kind of cross-section in a single temporal frame of the varied processes of evolution itself -- a mesh of events with many holes. In the case of "Love Lies Sleeping", we saw the refusal, quiet, more than quiet really, carried out by implication, of the dimension of depth. The search for wholeness, for a complete grasp of human life in both its natural and social dimensions, was sought instead in a complex build-up of facets, dimensions of perception, aspects of the world to which they answer, that complete and imply each other but in no way create a "beyond", and then, added to

this, as a kind of completing element, the social dimension itself with its complex material factors -- some explicitly political, indeed economic -- others more like outgrowths of the material and the elemental, Eros being foremost among these.

We see specifically modern or even post-modern tendencies, therefore, in these landscapes celebrated also for their pictorial charm. Yet here, in this piece, we notice a certain muting of the pictorial; a bit of what Auden called “good drab” in referring to Frost’s style; not that there is anything really resembling Frost, unless there are perhaps slight echoes of Frost’s “Directive”. But it is a far more genial piece than that, although in an enigmatic way, but good drab describes Wordsworth’s style rather well and this piece shows some of that resonant strong simplicity. It shows even in its own way a type of sublimity and of a very traditional sort that is Wordsworthian in kind -- quiet, subtle and mysterious, trembling on the verge of the incommunicable. In this piece the author attempts a holistic characterization of experience in a setting that exists on the edge of modernity. Perhaps as a consequence premodern conceptions of nature and of the significance of landscape re-emerge here while yet retaining contact with specifically modern modes of feeling and means of expression. We have, as a result, an extremely complex work which moves toward mysterious, almost incommunicable epiphanies with a quiet and recessive power. In it we see, after “Florida,” the return of substance in some benign form.

The piece begins softly with a somewhat prosaic and yet graceful opening that describes the birds -- puffins and auks -- that congregate on the two islands (a passage that recalls Andre Breton’s description of a similar sight in *Arcanum 17*). The islands are indeed named, yet I suspect that for most readers the names will mean little. We do not

know where we are, but we know that it is not the mainland; the birds are even described facetiously as turning their backs to it.

Out on the high “bird islands,” Ciboux and Hertford,
the razorbill auks and silly-looking puffins all stand
with their backs to the mainland –

Whether they are or not, there is a sense in which the poet herself is; she is making one of her journeys and taking us with her. As yet we do not really know where we are -- we are just *away*, and yet it is a place remote enough to have so many birds and where an airplane passing overhead is unusual enough to frighten the flocks of sheep:

(Sometimes, frightened by aeroplanes, they stampede
And fall over into the sea or onto the rocks.)

We have, therefore, a place which is at the edge of the modern world, at least as it was at the time of the poem’s composition (probably the early 1950’s). It does not take long for this introductory mood to shift and a more profound type of introduction to take its place instead. In the very next lines, it is as though we were now no longer looking over the place from afar and summarizing but were moving into it in a more genuine way. In fact, in these next lines we would appear to be in a small boat approaching the island from the water which is partly covered in heavy mists. Thus the poet’s attention is directed to the water itself, its movements and the mists themselves that partly conceal and partly reveal it and which it itself also partly reveals in a subtle perceptual interplay. All of this is brought into a complex and mysterious choreography in some of her most fluidly graceful and evocative lines:

The silken water is weaving and weaving,
Disappearing under the mist equally in all directions,
Lifted and penetrated now and then

By one shag's dripping serpent-neck,
 And somewhere the mist incorporates the pulse,
 Rapid but unurgent, of a motorboat.

Perhaps it recalls slightly the opening of Mendelsohn's *Hebrides* overture, to revert to impressionism again; and yet here also the importance of the impression cannot be overlooked, for the work makes its effect by relatively indirect means, avoiding the striking images and comparisons she often employs, though of course they are not entirely absent, in favor of a calm evenness of attention, almost at moments a mere journalism. Where there is nothing individually striking we are left with an overall attunement, as Heidegger might say, that is, an impression. Certain passages might almost be revised excerpts from a day book. It is, in a way, travel writing, and perhaps marks another threshold in her work, where the landscape poem per se gives way to the travel piece. The work is a fusion; in this sense too it resembles Wordsworth, for he also, though praising those who soar but never roam, was a great travel writer in his own way, as well as a great poet of landscape. And indeed the late 18th century knew many so called loco-descriptive poems, two such pieces being Wordsworth's first major efforts.

Yet often such poems are not merely descriptions of places but of the process of traveling through those places, and movement itself creates an heuristic device that reveals places and persons. In such a case, the landscape most often unfamiliar, physical motion through it, and discovery itself, blend, as they do so often in Wordsworth's peculiarly athletic genius. Such work marks a contrast to the ode on the well-known and familiar place -- the prospect poem, which was more inherently static and pictorializing, composed by means of patterns drawn in

part from painting -- descriptions according to sightlines in a perspectival vista, organization according to directions, physical placement, and the like.

Yet there are times when landscape and travel piece fuse, as when someone returns to a familiar place after being away for a while, the classic example being *Tintern Abbey*. In such a case, re-acquaintance after a lapse of time provides the heuristic mood -- estranging objects and yet heightening awareness. What is lost to freshness of perception -- lost because of the familiarity and also because the lapse of time creates strange doubles of awareness, palimpsests of then and now -- is made up for by a deeper awareness -- of this time itself, which in itself can have no image. Aside from the sobering mood, the foreshadowing of mortality and the thoughtfulness this often occasions, there is this further and perhaps deeper effect, the revelation of time as such, of human temporality in one of its most basic manifestations, *the return*, and so what is inherently enigmatic (What is time? says Augustine) and certainly invisible, becomes visible by means of ordinary objects, and in some ways less enigmatic. Or if that is not possible, the poet begins, in his own sense of himself and of his personhood, to share in this sense of mystery and enigma, as the landscape, once familiar, becomes doubly strange by becoming the mirror of his own temporal passage. I say temporal passage because the otherwise purely human fact of mortality, in its association in the poet's meditative descriptions with nature itself, becomes something seemingly stranger, more archaic one is tempted to say, or at any rate unknown; our only word for this equation of sensed mortality plus resonating enigma (known through the general impression) is Fate, and so the *Tintern Abbey* poem, despite its somewhat domesticating conclusion, is a kind

of conjuring, within the hostile rationalizing culture of the time, of this archaic divinity. Yet it is significant that it is only by means of the impression that this comes about.

As we have already noted, the impression is the fundamental way in which we relate to the world in that it subsumes all the other faculties we use to deal with it. They in their several modes are brought to bear upon appropriate types of problems and objects; yet an overall sense of the world underpins these several operations. Not that they are directly dependent upon it, but the impression -- in all its necessary vagueness -- would seem to be the most encompassing capacity that we have, or is, rather, the name we give to the sum of our capacities when viewed, as it were, from a distance, and in particular when we are not dealing with some practical or praktognostic issue -- though even here, one might say, and does in fact say, something such as, "she has a sense of how to play the piece now" (after having heard so-and-so perform it).

To return to the example we used in connection with the poem "Florida" -- we do not have a feeling for whether or not a storm will arrive this evening, and if so, its severity, by sequentially reading off and collating data bits from the graphs of the clouds and waves. We rather consult our overall experiences, which include observation of data, but also strata of memory, our direct perception -- of an overall and relatively undirected kind -- of the air, the light, the movement of winds; even our mood plays a role, and perhaps an important one. The poet, therefore, attunes himself or herself to the totality of the scene, the total ambience of the place and time, the dynamism and mutual interaction of the circumstantial factors rather than their mere discreet presence or absence. We might call this perception holistic, yet it is in many ways similar to the way we grasp

works of music, though here it is the total self which listens and is attuned and the world itself, or some part of it, that is attended to.

With respect to “Cape Breton,” we may see the first remarkable instances of such deep impressionism in those lines about the “silken water” which keeps “weaving and weaving.” The subtlety of the lines’ movement and word choice is especially remarkable. The beautiful choice of the word “silken” to describe water conveys the sense of smoothness without absolute stillness, for we know that silk rustles and has its own affinity with subtle ripples and waves; in its rustling it creates sounds which yet are barely discernible above silence; and it is a type of fabric that seems to have its own luminosity or shimmer, never bright but subdued, and never concentrated in one place but hauntingly distributed, active and always moving. Even when silk is motionless, it is yet in motion.

The same can be said of this water, which takes on a special softness as well as a recessive and alluring quality by means of this single word and its complex of associated impressions. And yet the water is not still; wonderfully, it is “weaving and weaving,/disappearing under the mist equally in all directions....” It is an active power and not merely an element. It seems to encompass or to envelop, though never too closely, but is rather at the same time elusive; it is everywhere and nowhere, like a scent or like an idea. In addition, weaving is an action often associated in folklore with magic. It is also associated with the feminine -- it is women who weave, whether they be old-fashioned housewives, or mythical figures like Penelope and Clotho; and of course it is women who turn to witchcraft, in which practice they weave their magic spells. Clearly it is a charmed

and magical water that we have here; not merely an active surface in subtle interplay with the fog that veils it, it is a strange congregation of powers in its own right.

It is not only acutely described visually; at the same time, allegorical hints are discreetly placed here and there, becoming active in the back of the reader's mind in subtle ways perhaps only later or after many readings. Indeed, some readers might prefer to ignore them altogether. I myself feel somewhat that way at times, but having once noticed these things I find they become like the shading or highlighting in a picture -- a touch of green here or blue there -- that one takes ages to notice, it seems (or did one? And it could be that one had noticed it all along) but then cannot ignore again after that, though at the same time one also does not feel they are among the major elements in the composition. In fact, to pursue the matter, we see that this feminine water, in the very next line, is "lifted and penetrated now and then" (not repeatedly, but just occasionally) by a "shag's dripping serpent neck." That is to say, by a length of exposed log. In the very next lines, however, as though sensing that things have gone a bit too far, there is a movement away from this sexual imagery, and we are told simply that the mist incorporates the pulse of a motorboat (which yet is rapid but unurgent).

It is as if the entire context -- and it is not merely a landscape or seascape but includes the whole perceptible world -- is imagined as a single living entity, including both male and female principles. It is manifest around the speaker without exactly taking shape, for it is composed of things for the most part amorphous --mist and water -- with the only distinct form being the phallic shag. At the same time, however, it does not need form, but only movement and activity, only its powers, which are multiple, distributed, and elusive; in fact though it incorporates the motor's sound, it is not really itself a

corporeal entity but is instead something held in potential, like the *possest* of Nicholas of Cusa, which indicates both power and existence at once – [Note]4] existence as active power; or perhaps the elemental, as explicated by Levinas, by which he designates those aspects of nature which have no shape or form and no real quantity but are manifest as environments in which one is immersed – light, and the atmosphere, and the earth itself in its boundless and endless support.[NOTE]5 These non-finite things, having no shape or boundary, are inexhaustible; and thus the magical environment into which the speaker has ventured -- lured on by the strange birds who are its spirits despite their silly look -- is itself inexhaustible and is not disturbed even by the presence of the boat's engine but accepts it, assimilating even this ugly, noisy, smelly thing with its hydrocarbon pollutants (though of course it is only a small engine).

In the second stanza our perspective suddenly expands, deepens to include the landscape of the mainland, that is, the mainland of Canada, from which we have just come, and which we are actually moving away from. There is a sudden expansion of the description's scope both in terms of range and also with regard to direction, and the effect is like a kind of panorama. Perhaps she is only thinking of these places -- these distant valleys and gorges -- and not actually seeing them, and so the brief passage would be a small example of the "surmise" that Geoffrey Hartman sees as part of the characteristic thought structure of the romantic landscape poem, that is, a movement of the mind among possibilities, a mental exploration of other times, places, conditions that takes the given as a point of departure, departs from it and returns to it, in a dialectical play.[NOT6] In any case, the objective is to give a completeness of account, a fuller description of the world, its powers and potentials, than would be possible with a strict adherence to the

given. This effort is itself indicative of the poem's attempt at encompassing, at projecting a world characterized by a holism in which everything can be given some place somewhere. Thus, in the next lines, even ice and snow are sucked away almost to spirit, presumably by the wind, and spirit, that enigmatic power normally accommodated very slightly in this secular poet's work, is given at least some small place, *elsewhere*, in some distant valley, and close by to "almost."

In the next half line we move further, and this itself indicates how rapidly the work's perspectives shift; even in the transition from water to the passage just quoted, one was surprised a bit by the shift, from inherently near and enveloping to far and almost out of sight. Now we are no longer in the realm of the almost out of sight; rather, there is a focusing and in fact an emphasis upon clear vision. It is as if the poet screws up her binoculars to their highest power and bears down visually on that landscape, trying to squeeze detail out of it:

The same mist hangs in thin layers
Among the valleys and gorges of the mainland
Like rotting snow-ice sucked away
Almost to spirit; the ghosts of glaciers drift
Among those folds and folds of fir: spruce and hackmatack –
Dull, dead, deep peacock-colors,
Each riser distinguished from the next
By an irregular nervous saw-tooth edge,
Alike, but certain as a stereoscopic view.

There is not much detail but what there is is presented in images that create a deliberately strange alienation effect. Yet we are seeing not so much space but time, for it requires time for trees -- spruce and hackmatack -- to grow that large and in such numbers that they rise row upon row, rank upon rank. We see not trees but a forest -- a fairly dense and, therefore, old forest seen in a kind of condensing glimpse. In addition, these folds and

folds contain ghosts of glaciers that drift there, still somehow present. Spirit has been translated to ghost, a word less assimilated to Christian mythology and more evocative of the primeval or autochthonous. Thus the impression of a special and haunted place -- a place of elemental powers -- is deepened and broadened in this section, broadened to include the land itself and even portions of the mainland and deepened to include the vistas of earlier and even prehistoric time. In addition, though, this realm, as we might think of it, has an inclusiveness that balances and harmonizes opposites that elsewhere are kept apart and in conflict: male and female, to begin with, but also physical and whatever is other than or beyond that, about which the poem is suitably vague -- is it the almost to spirit windsucked, or the primeval spirit haunting the glacial valleys? In any event, an imaginative space is made for what is not merely present, for the other-than-given, and we are shown, in a series of observations, intuitive surmises and impressions, that knowledge of the world cannot be limited to data and observation in its narrowest sense. In addition we also see that the adequate style is not always the most striking or original -- good drab is also good, and even necessary, to accommodate certain moods, certain corners of mind or world. And yet at last no one style will do -- liquid interweaving of syllables, perceptual notation, the tessellated abbreviation of rows of trees seen as though stereoscopically, word play and innuendo, some slight of hand with etymologies -- all are given a place in an orchestration that is both virtuosic and wonderfully unobtrusive.

Yet in contrast to Wordsworth, who moves always gradually, as Hartman shows, the poem is marked at every point by abrupt shifts. This is its way of accommodating or rather of approaching the wholeness it seeks -- a multiplication of views not so much

cubist perhaps as reminiscent more of Paul Klee (one thinks of his wonderful mountainscapes composed of subtly modulated squares of color). This abruptness is somewhat muted by the relative plainness of the style, for it *is* plain in comparison to some of her other work, despite the artfulness we have already noted. What then is the difference between this and the perspectivalism seen in “Love Lies Sleeping”? Before taking up this question, we must follow the poem’s journey to its conclusion, for it is in a sense a journey poem, clearly, yet one that, as in Wordsworth, folds time into space and space into the next dimension beyond, whatever that might be thought to be, and it is significant to note its overall vagueness. The dimension beyond, if it exists, is something that assures the wholeness of this life, and the lure that it creates is not the lure of escape but of deeper engagement *here*; it has no affinity with obscurantism, and if it warns and cautions, as it often does in Wordsworth, it is only to prevent knowledge from moving incautiously into power and folly, an idea that might have carried uppermost a political overtone in his time, and in ours an ecological one. It might seem strange to think of Bishop as issuing warnings in this quiet poem, or in any of her poems, but the effort toward wholeness must contain also rejections, since every whole body rejects what is poisonous to it.

In keeping, therefore, with the poem’s habit to this point, we see another sudden shift. The forest is old, the island itself is too, and full of voices, and yet it is not so old that it cannot be logged and roads and the like put in; and so in the next section we begin to see that it has become an outpost of progress -- there are yellow bulldozers, though without drivers because it is Sunday, and little white churches compared to lost quartz arrow heads. There is a certain satirical intent and an implied historical irony since it was

this same Christianity that was used as a means of culturally subduing the native inhabitants as part of the overall effort to displace them, and yet now, as the next lines make clear, it appears that both have been displaced and something else is coming instead. But what? Will it be the time of the bulldozer with its roads? Or will it be a rebirth of some more fundamental powers which lie hidden in the landscape itself and which could be brought to awareness, perhaps through a rebirth of indigenous cultures? Actually the poem, I think, does not encourage this second interpretation: once alluded to (and very slightly) the aboriginals are dropped. By contrast, the danger of the bulldozer remains in awareness -- it is one point in a pattern of references that begins with the motor boat of the opening and concludes with the bus in the next section. Yet more important than these references to either native peoples or machinery is the speaker's explicit statement that the meaning of the landscape is lost. A landscape can have no meaning in itself; its meaning can be found only in a given way of life. Therefore, the statement means that all known ways of life are lost. More specifically, they remain not as meanings but as something else. The idea of this something else is what the poem is attempting to introduce us to in its earlier sections -- the idea of an elemental presence which yet is not spiritual in any known way. It is really the idea of wholeness touched on previously, in which salient elements still relate to each other and their context in an original harmony that has not been too disturbed by the pursuit of will-driven practical objectives on the part of humans -- the roads, bulldozers, and the like. This wholeness and its fragile orders becomes at a certain point our main impression -- it is vital, and, in a way, partly unobserved, partly unknown, while yet also being known to a degree, in an aesthetic receptivity that shows these things in their inherent beauty and in an impressionistic

attunement that allows this sense of beauty to lead the mind further into deeper reflections, perhaps of a Kantian or Heideggerian kind -- that is, on organic wholeness and purposiveness or perhaps on the fundamental and mute mystery of Being and on the wisdom of letting its manifestations -- these transient creatures, these waters, these rocks and wooded hills -- remain as they are and were, without coercing them into imposed patterns essentially guided by commercial ends. I say *perhaps* Kant and perhaps Heidegger because the poetry, naturally, does not mention either, and the three-dimensional fullness of its descriptions distances it from any particular thesis. In fact, it is this very fullness of description which is its main point. Here it is pursued with an array of stylistic qualities that move it in a somewhat different direction than we had seen her work take previously. Rather than the bright and painterly, the clever and charming, or the absolutely amazing, we have a subtle plainness that tries to move the reader inward, not into the self and its problems, but into the underlying substance gathered here in these inherently meaningless yet somehow animated waters and hills, these ancient forests that do in fact have no thesis or lesson, but are themselves and give themselves. Is it possible for human beings to co-exist in a non-destructive way with them? They are not necessarily that fragile (and there is perhaps a slight optimism here, though on this score we must remember the date of composition); the mist incorporates the sound of the motorboat; the smallness of the roads (as yet) is dwarfed by the impending forests that reach above and around them, and the stone itself that reaches below them and is their support. Her writing creates a striking picture even here, though here, more by means of composition and proportion than by arresting image and color -- it is that of the smallness of humans in the landscape, here presented directly to the eye in the very way the piece is

organized, and in its pacing and balances. It is almost a kind of Chinese approach in which the human is only one element of a wholeness that is grasped without forcing the issue. The hope for the human lies in its very smallness and non-essentiality.

Yet the devastation of the bulldozer is still real; in fact, it is greater than at first appears.

Whatever the landscape had of meaning appears to have been abandoned
 Unless the road is holding it back, in the interior,
 Where we cannot see,
 where deep lakes are reputed to be,
 and disused trails and mountains of rock
 and miles of burnt forests standing in gray scratches
 like the admirable scriptures made on stones by stones –
 and these regions now have little to say for themselves
 except in thousands of light song-sparrow songs floating upward
 freely, dispassionately, through the mist, and meshing
 in brown-wet, fine, torn fish-nets.

In this passage, perhaps the heart of the poem, we do detect a slight reminiscence of Frost, not only the evocation of immemorial landscape such as we find in “Directive” but also the denuded and ruined landscape of “The Census Taker,” in which a speaker witnesses ecological devastation and depopulation. In keeping with the conciseness of this poem, the topic is mentioned in a few lines, yet they are telling in the way they evoke the elemental and primitive reality of the natural world at its most stark -- the scraping of glaciers against rock and of rock against rock, the processes -- inhuman, prehuman -- that create the small space in which the human can have its habitation. (And there is perhaps another brief anti-religious dig, so to say, in the use of the word scripture, and of her evident preference for these scratched and rocky ones, as opposed to the written and spiritual, but here it is as much an inappropriate anthropocentrism that is her target as any spiritualism per se, one of whose main faults then must be seen as the absurdity of

viewing humans as the pinnacle of creation or of evolution, as the case may be). In addition, the fundamentally more hopeful tone (in comparison with either of Frost's pieces and perhaps his work in general) brings a more positive image to the author's mind, suggesting the resiliency of the natural world: though abused in this way, there is yet still boundless energy remaining which throws up in profusion song and song birds alike -- the two things seeming to fuse -- and the final image of the flight of birds as a kind of fishing net deftly recalls the marine landscape of the poem's opening, a gesture which seems to loop the whole ecosystem into a self-echoing whole.

And yet there *is* a community here, nor is it necessarily a destructive thing. The poem's genial side is seen with the entrance of the bus -- a kind of "local" in this remote spot, responsible for providing transportation for everyone and everything:

A small bus comes along, in up-and-down rushes,
 Packed with people, even to its step.
 (On weekdays with groceries, spare automobile parts, and pump parts,
 But today only two preachers extra, one carrying his frock coat on a hanger.)
 It passes the closed roadside stand, the closed schoolhouse,
 Where today no flag is flying
 From the rough-adzed pole topped with a white china doorknob.
 It stops, and a man carrying a baby gets off,
 Climbs over a stile, and goes down through a small steep meadow,
 Which establishes its poverty in a snowfall of daisies,
 To his invisible house beside the water.

It is an image of Community -- comical, grotesque, crowded and cramped together in odd ways, like something from an R Crumb cartoon or perhaps late Guston. The holism of the poem must include the human as well, though it does not give it a privileged place. Along with the comical image of the crowded bus, it is also represented by the passage of generations -- the man carrying a baby -- and the evidently humble dwelling place that

blends in well enough with its environment as to be invisible. The concluding image of the snowfall of daisies leaves us with a kind of pastoral set against a broad ecological awareness that has moved beyond a narrow anthropocentrism.

What is the purpose of existence though? Does it have any? The landscape, though a presence, has no conceivable meaning. The secular progress of history, which has really not reached this remote backwater, is unstoppable and makes this basic fact clear: humans are alone. They may be alone with the world, with the ecosystem, or with Being itself, but they are alone. Assuredly they are with each other, and they exist in the landscape with other actual creatures, with which they share a similar biological nature, but with whom they cannot really communicate. They are still alone. In addition, each individual is as well, though significantly there are none in the poem except for the thoughtful and amused speaker, who seems to move always ahead of and apart from the humans and the human actions she witnesses, whose traces she notes. From what place is she speaking, exactly? This simple question has no clear answer; it is a detail left curiously vague in the poem. In the last stanza she thinks of the dark brooks, a Wordsworthian image, certainly, and one of natural power and of origination, yet also of the mist and the “white mutations of its dream,” and the poem seems to boarder subtly on a kind of benign nihilism. The world is a world of dew, as is said in Buddhism, a mist world. It is not unreal, but it is fragile, and tenuous, hanging, as it does, on the edge of nothing.

AT THE FISHHOUSES/HISTORICISM

This poem represents a further development of the poet's profound realism, its deeper and deeper investment with a multi-dimensional significance, here reaching a culmination of profundity and naturalness at once. As in Thoreau at his best, clear realistic reporting and a precise yet manifold symbolism fuse seamlessly.

The poem has been commented on a good deal, yet, once again Thomas Travisano in his pioneering study sets the basic terms of the discussion:

“At the Fishhouses” (1948) has an important place in Bishop's development quite apart from its extraordinary artistic merit, because it defines the vital role of history in Bishop's work, a role that numerous critics have dismissed too lightly. Stephen Stepanchev's evaluation is shared by others: “Unlike many of her Auden-influenced contemporaries, she distrusts history, with its melodramatic blacks and whites, and prefers geography, with its subtle gradations of color....” What Stepanchev had in mind is that Bishop's work, unlike that of her friends and contemporaries like Lowell and Jarrell, rarely confronts the major turning points of history, and that is correct as far as it goes. But there is another kind of history, whose study is very much the trend among contemporary historians, that is vital to her work: that history reflected in what Braudel calls “The structure of everyday life.”” [Travisano 123]

I would like to suggest that although this is true (up to a point), she nonetheless takes note of some larger historical process as well, and that in addition her penetration into the structures of everyday life may not be as fruitful for her historical insight as many commentators imagine.

Although it is a cold evening
Down by one of the fishhouses
An old man sits netting,
his net, in the gloaming almost invisible,
a dark purple-brown,
And his shuttle worn and polished.

The net is, in a way, history itself, or at least it is events with which we must deal, a fabric of events, of circumstances, that must be dealt with. Here, of course, it is an implement of labor, and so it must be mended, and this is now what is being done. Yet the workman we see is not a mythological figure, a Penelope or Clotho, he is a workman, and so the fabric of events presses upon him, as it must naturally do, with what we sometimes call the force of circumstances, since he is a finite individual caught in its causal chains and circumstantial relations. But he is working anyway. Why and how? Like everyone else, in order to live, and also in an attempt to be free, even though this is impossible. Impossible, but not hopeless. And so he keeps on. In the gloaming as the poem says -- an old archaic word -- and almost invisible, he cannot be seen with any detail. His net itself is almost invisible. Where are we, and when? Does he take on, now, more figurative outlines, so that we might recall the similar moment in the poem by Ingeborg Bachmann in which the sailors mended their nets? Is this figure too perhaps an apostle, strayed from the Gospels, mute and toiling, truly immemorial, and not the less so because we answer this question in the negative (since even the brief glimpse of its possibility at the edge of awareness is enough)? Enough for what? To open the muteness of the given to the deeper resonance of interpretation, so that it can actually speak, even if it can never really be seen. It is significant, for example, that this poet known so much for her visual effects here leaves most of them out or mutes them. Will this worker and his humble labor ever be seen? Perhaps not. And yet he can be understood nonetheless. In this poem beautifully visual in its own way, and yet dimly so, we recognize the historical science and revolutionary gnosis of great writing once again, and we encounter its sovereign power, that of making the actual appear to divulge its encompassing

significance inevitably and with a kind of artful transparency so natural that we do not notice it. The next section focuses on the context of work:

The air smells so strong of codfish
 It makes one's nose run and one's eyes water.
 The five fishhouses have steeply peaked roofs
 And narrow, cleated gangplanks slant up
 To storerooms in the gables
 For the wheelbarrows to be pushed up and down on.

Here we see the concrete conditions of work, in a way similar to what we sometimes find in Frost, where the physical reality of working is often presented; here though, significantly, it is presented not in itself but by means of the places and implements it must use. Yet the arduousness is conveyed anyway -- all that pushing and hauling up and down, and in a stench so strong it makes your eyes water. What must it be to do this everyday? (And our natural reaction, of course, is the "but they get used to it," that we've already spoken about).

There is a sudden transition, however; as though we were to be given a bit of relief:

All is silver: the heavy surface of the sea,
 Swelling slowly as if considering spilling over,
 Is opaque, but the silver of the benches,
 The lobster pots, and masts, scattered
 Among the wild jagged rocks,
 Is of an apparent translucence
 Like the small old buildings with an emerald moss
 Growing on their shoreward walls.
 The big fish tubs are completely lined
 With layers of beautiful herring scales
 And the wheelbarrows are similarly plastered
 With creamy iridescent coats of mail,
 With small iridescent flies crawling on them.

Silver, of course, is the color of money; unless its color is gold, but silver will do. It is the more ordinary of the two. And the capitalist venture represented by the fishhouses is not, was not, has not been for a long time, one of the great money-making schemes of the world. That began to be oil well before the poem was written. Instead, it is something that has persisted, and perhaps it is even a bit out of date in the way it is done here, seemingly all by hand (the workman's shuttle is well-worn). Silver is also the color of age, and of the past. Old people have silver hair; more, one thinks of old photographs in black and white as well as those early photographic and pre-photographic technologies -- the silver gelatin, the daguerreotype, and the like. Almost abandoned, the place has receded somehow; it is a backwater of time, about to sink into the past before our eyes. We begin to realize what the poem's subject actually is, despite its indirection. The latter section of the passage is once again focused on the stress of work but evokes not so much its effort as its discomfort, and the general muck and unpleasantness associated with it; in addition, we see, by implication, its effect on the environment, that is, on the world. The principle beauty is taken. Does this always have to be? Specifically, in the passage focused on beautiful herring scales and the iridescent coats of mail and then the iridescent flies, we have a kind of dual perception of this place -- the unpleasantness of being in it versus the beauty of seeing it. Yet there is a simplicity in the poem that discourages overly clever interpretation, and so we may perhaps repeat our question: is it necessary that the extraction of existence from the world must destroy both beauty and the world? There are stains like dried blood on the wooden handles of the capstan, and one realizes the weight of daily misery that is imposed upon humans and creatures both in the context of labor.

We may say daily labor, and yet the true context of labor is not the day to day world merely. It is, more specifically, an historical one, affected by global forces and long causal chains reaching back perhaps centuries. Therefore, we can see that, looked at closely, the poem does reflect the broad movements of history though it does so in oblique ways. One reflects upon basic questions in looking at these buildings and in considering the day to day life and effort they represent. How did they get here? What has affected them and why? Is it merely the passage of time? The herring boats come in, but from where? And are there, farther off, more distant locations that yet have concrete influences upon this place here and the lives lived here, which seem yet to have disappeared? Fishing has always been a global enterprise, undertaken on the high seas and influenced by continent-wide markets and ocean-wide environmental conditions. There is always globalization in this sense; it is nothing new. Here we see the tip of its iceberg. Yet the iceberg extends not only outward in space but also backward in time, and we recall the oldness of the buildings, the way it all seems to be of the past. The misery of labor, though enacted in the day to day world, is itself based in a set of political and economic circumstances that extend through space, through the boundaries of nations, and through temporal, historical strata: temporal in their extent over a given individual's life (he is an old man now; how long he has been doing this) and across generations (he knew the speaker's grandfather); historical in that they involve the changing political, economic and material conditions of different times and places, themselves affected by those of other places and of other times. His knife, for instance, and his net are archaic implements and in fact may have been produced elsewhere, or the materials for their production were; therefore the entire landscape of work we see here is a patchwork of

various times -- some 20th century (the no-doubt motorized boat), some 19th, some older, some ancient -- all thrown together by the demands of day to day existence under the influence, the pressure, of capital, which itself circulates as the water does.

In the following strophe it is as if we were being introduced to this water itself, lead down into it in a step by step fashion by an almost cinema-like movement:

Down at the water's edge, at the place
Where they haul up the boats, up the long ramp
Descending into the water, thin silver
Tree trunks are laid horizontally
Across the gray stones, down and down
At intervals of four or five feet.

Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,
Element bearable to no mortal,
To fish and to seals...

The purpose of the first group of lines is clear enough; it is to show that this water is still water, and, given what is still to come in the poem, that this must not be lost sight of. We retain our purchase on the physical world, even though the poem continually strives to expand our awareness of historical context beyond the merely given, it is important to do this in the right way, in such a way that this given itself is not lost, and with a naturalness and lack of contrivance in the writing such that we seem to directly see the larger and encompassing realities within the immediate ones. But what one especially notices is the change of tone in the second group of lines, lines that introduce the very long concluding strophe, and in which they are repeated verbatim, appearing a second time midway through as a kind of leitmotif, an instance of the meditative speaker reminding herself of an impending truth. To speak of details, there is first of all an element of formality in the syntax, though the diction itself is unremarkable, except for the word "mortal." This word,

of course, defines humans by virtue of their relationship to death; they are the mortals, the dying ones, not merely in that they die but in that they know they are going to, unlike mere animals -- here, fish and seals -- who live their lives unaware of this. Therefore the human relationship to history is determined by this fact; only mortals are affected by history in the sense that only they have a profound awareness, always with them to one degree or another, of their own mortality. The poem here seems to assimilate to some extent the discourse of existentialism and yet at the same time it makes this encounter with mortality the opening through which we encounter the historical as such. This encounter itself, though, is fatal. It carries with it the knowledge that one's entire existence, as likewise that of one's social world and its era, is fated to annihilation, perhaps oblivion. The only counterforce is knowledge, yet this is a rather austere form of comfort (and likewise austere the rhetoric in which this idea is expressed).

There is perhaps a slight problem with this rhetoric, or, at moments one might think so. More specifically, individualism is not interrogated and the piece remains an American poem for all its philosophical depth, with all of the characteristic limitations that go with this. That is, the speaker seems to speak for herself, certainly, and in a vague and general way for everyone, yet the idea that historical awareness entails alliances (and enmities) seems to be evaded. Perhaps for this reason there is an abstractness in the concluding lines, for example, that is the result of a lack of analysis, most likely due to unwillingness rather than inability. Does the poem, at this point in its development, continue to deal with either the broad historical movements we saw earlier or the day to day realities that we also remarked on. In those stanzas, it was as if it could do both at once, yet the abstract rhetoric or the conclusion seems somewhat generalizing and hollow

by comparison, though it has been widely admired. For one thing, the nature of human historicity cannot be, by definition, an affair of individuals but only of classes, though it is only individuals who die and not classes. Thus the bourgeois understanding of history will always remain limited, therefore, and at a certain point reveal a thinness and abstractness of exactly the kind we see here; where we encounter resonant assertion but no portrayal in concrete terms of who this “we” is and what in fact happens to them, what they must do. Therefore, these metaphors of burning and the like remain to some extent without referent. They can be easily interpreted, of course, and retain their own level of expressiveness; yet they remain as such items in a rhetorical manner rather than vehicles of really specific meaning.

Perhaps it is an unreasonable demand, and in our own eagerness or need it may be that we leap ahead impatiently and demand of the piece more than any short poem can give. Nonetheless, I repeat my question: Who is this we? And what must they do? To have insight into this, we must go to the next phase of our protagonist’s journey.

NOTES

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CHAPTER FOUR ELSEWHERE

Bishop's next volume published in 1965 is called *Questions of Travel*. By travel she means an understanding of one's experience that enables one to grasp it not only in its immediate givenness, in its direct impress upon the self and the sensibility, but also in its historical and cultural context. We find now that her attention moves outward from the self as though in concentric circles, attempting to understand the factors which have shaped her life, her attitudes and sensibility, by seeing these against the larger patterns discernible in the world beyond, in the society one inhabits, whether it be the one in which one was born or a new one, foreign and recently discovered, which indeed one is still in the process of discovering, and which therefore appears in all its strangeness, prompting by this means a sharper awareness and a deeper consideration. The means of

putting our experience, our lives, into broader historical perspective are found most often in books of historical analysis. Yet the poet cannot remain content with that; while not ignorant of this dimension, she attempts to have a direct insight into the nature of these things by observation, by feelings, by impressions. Observation of what? however, feelings and impressions of what? This can only be of the sights, sounds, and the inhabitants of the new place itself. And so by means of direct observation primarily, and prompted by that response which is the perennial one of all travelers -- curiosity -- she achieves some of her finest and most accessible works.

The first three poems of the book are quite explicit in announcing their intentions. They seem to form a sort of triptych. In the first we find this fairly explicit statement:

Here is a coast: here is a harbor:
 here, after a meager diet of horizon, is some scenery:
 impractically shaped and -- who knows? -- self-pitying mountains,
 sad and harsh beneath their frivolous greenery,

with a little church on top of one. And warehouses,
 some of them painted a feeble pink, or blue,
 and some tall, uncertain palms. Oh, tourist,
 is this how this country is going to answer you

and your immodest demands for a different world,
 and a better life, and complete comprehension
 of both at last, and immediately,
 after eighteen days of suspension?

The style here is entirely realistic and almost journalistic; there is little or no trace of the symbolic and quasi-allegorical intentions we have seen recurring with greater or lesser emphasis in her other work. In its adherence to the immediately apparent, it could almost be a piece by Robert Lowell (or perhaps James Merrill). The initial emphasis is on the

self in its specificity and finitude: this person, this situation, doing these things -- she has a certain humor, seems a bit nervous, is acquainted with Miss Breen of Glens Falls, and likes bourbon and cigarettes. We are shown this specific individual, whom we are to take as a real person -- and given the style of the poem, it wouldn't matter if the actual Elizabeth Bishop made up a lot of this; the important thing is that it is typical of a whole range of persons in a certain time and place. She seems completely real, and this is achieved by an orchestration of a range of mundane details.

Yet merely existing, with these traits or with others, is not enough. It may be that some, or many, in our society, have forgotten this fundamental truth, or, that factors, forces in our society have worked to induce many to forget it. Even existing pleasantly, with enough money for relatively comfortable trips abroad, amusing company, the ability to give orders to a "boy," and all the bourbon and cigarettes one could want, is not enough. There must be more; yet although there are innumerable possibilities -- from religion, to love, or art -- there is really only one thing fundamentally worthwhile: a human being must understand the nature of his or her historical experience. That is the only thing that will do. Everything else is secondary. The speaker knows this quite well and says as much. This is the thing that distinguishes her; she does not travel for amusement and curiosity. Rather for her it is a search (for a better life) and research (for complete comprehension). And if you put these two things together, you will in fact need a different world, for the old one contains all the factors impeding your comprehension and inhibiting your life. This is the line of flight in its original form in English poetry: brought into it initially by Byron, in *Don Juan*, and for the same reasons -- search and research. And we do in fact hear distant echoes of Byron's fluency, humor, and aptness

with detail. There is yet at the same time a definite nervousness in this voice, a defensive characteristic that indicates the speaker's anxiety about what the coming experiences might be and how they will change her.

And perhaps in a way she overdoes it a bit and is affected in her behavior. Does she regret the 'boy' as soon as she says it, for example? The actual word she might have spoken is unknown to me, assuming she was speaking, or attempting to speak, the local language. Nor can I surmise what kind of resonance it would have had in that time and place; but of course she is writing in English for American readers, and indeed the volume was published at that very time when the Civil Rights movement in the United States was seeing some of its most charged moments and most tragic encounters. We bring this up not so much to accuse the author of this or of that, but rather to illustrate two larger points. The first is that one is not always in complete control of one's situation; rather there are times when one speaks from the beginning of change which is developing even within one. Then, in the burgeoning element of learning, our actions and dispositions are attended by unaccountable factors, and, sometimes, it may be that things escape from us -- a word, a glance, a gesture, perhaps even a mood that we communicate to others. We are becoming other, and this also means becoming multiple, and both new and old at once. It is the moment of incipience, when we are neither this nor that, neither here nor there. A port, of course, and a customs, are perfect images of transition. She and her companions are even, she tells us, going to the interior -- a phrase loaded with suggestions both psychological and global-historical. Surely both ideas are present in the speaker's mind, but in a way that is as yet brightly confused in its nervous excitement and anxiety, such that deeper, more thoughtful considerations, though not absent, have not yet

been followed out. And unquestionably it would be both sides of this term -- psychological and geo-political -- that would occupy her mind, and not merely the former. For her mind, beneath its surface busyness, swarms with two questions: not only, How will this change me? but also with a more basic one still, *What* will it be?

What is this *it*? What *is* the interior, after all? These are the questions of global politics and of history; these are the questions of the profound otherness, the truly foreign that is deeper than language, accent, or physical characteristics. Specifically they are the otherness of money and economic development and disparity. All this is surely in her mind, though as yet in a molten form, the *incipits* of what it might become, which as yet we do not know. Could it be that it won't become much of anything at all and that the whole thing will really be rather a disappointment? However that may be, we must return to that "boy" for a moment longer.

What is incipience? That time when the molecular seething of impossibles that we call learning begins to burgeon within one, or rather not even within, but one is caught up in becomings, processes that carry you in a direction, or in several, and you are no longer yourself -- single, composed -- with the effort of attempting to do what you are trying for. Instead you are divided, multiple, fissioning, leaving yourself in your own wake, which becomes at once new pathways branching. You find yourself returning in your departure, departing even as you return, which you do continually -- to the memories of your self of a year, a month, a moment ago. This is the process of beginning, learning, becoming other. One is not entirely oneself. What is one then? It is here, now, in this context, that language speaks on its own. The social embodiment and negotiation of meaning that we call by the name language -- is it a gesture, as Mereau-Ponty asserted?

A performative, a constative?[1] Does it express, enact, indicate, or is it itself a means of learning? And perhaps of relearning. (It is an obvious question: will she continue to say “boy” after she has been in the interior for a while? But, more than this, for this is an issue of manners as much as of anything, -- though manners are important, as we learn in one of her other poems -- what will language as such teach? And which language?

There are thus three, rather than two, considerations, three realms to be encountered. The first is the personal and psychological; the second is the historical and geo-political with its economic results; and the third is the dimension of culture. Language bridges all three, since it is used in all three, yet it is essentially an aspect of culture. And culture, though it can be seen as a direct expression or a mediated expression of politics and economics has also its own internal order, produces its own particular dimension, or confluence of dimensions -- pictorial, mythological, theatrical, literary, musical; and then, those more transient, ill-defined, ambiguously defined cultures of personal relations, manners, in fact of deportment, of cuisine and of the managements of health and the self, and, finally, of eros. This first group, what we might think of as high culture, would be better defined as formal culture, since it generates and is inseparable from a range of achieved artifacts and symbolic forms, the realm of symbolic forms familiar from the great studies by Ernst Cassirer, Panovsky, Suzanne Langer and others; the second group, an affair not of achieved form but of something else -- the mood, the feeling, the attunement, the sense of *how* -- how to and how not to, the *gesture* -- we might call ethnic culture, using that word in its broadest sense, as designating the *ethnos*. Yet we see that in a single passing mood, a single moment, a single gesture (a command), a single word (a noun) -- *boy* -- whole dimensions and their

histories can overlap. The poems following must disimplicate much of what is impacted in that one moment, or rather in these two most charged moments of this very first poem: this one we are speaking of now -- this verbal action (Rude? Unthinking? Mere faux pas?) and then the very different moment of the conclusion, the moment of passing through the border and into the new world, the new world that is both older and newer than the one she has just left -- a genuine back water of time in which one can perhaps recreate oneself and relearn the world itself.

BRAZIL, JANUARY 1, 1502/THE BIRTH OF SIGHT

“Arrival at Santos” is unusual among her poems in that it has a date -- January 1952. The very next piece in the volume does also but wears it as its title. It is as if, almost immediately, the speaker makes an effort to orient herself in this new world by recognizing that it is an old world after all. To begin to describe it, she must begin by going back 450 years.

There is a danger in modern consciousness -- that of forgetting the past; if one is an artist, one forgets the traditions of one's art and decides that one can do as one likes. But by this means one becomes inconsequential. But what is the way to avoid this, this -- for the artist, if not for the ordinary person --- this terrible fate? It can only be by making one's creativity a process of historical search as well as a struggle with some personal problem or with the chosen medium. This must be the key to artistic production -- one's motivation is a conflict within oneself or with the world, and one's means of dealing with

these are the materials of one's art; both of these poles have historical roots and both must be traced back in their different ways and to their varying depths. This manifold relation -- personal and public, contemporary and historical, purely aesthetic and, in a sense, ethical (in that it is concerned with truth and the barriers to it) is the real subject of writing (or of art in general). The poem enacts this movement from immediacy to historicism, from impulsive mimesis to self-questioning and irony, in its structure and language.

At first we begin outside of human history in the biological present of nature. This is acknowledged in the first two lines which act as a kind of threshold. Once past them we are in a different world from any we have seen so far. It is overwhelmingly an experience of seeing. The poet's language is at its most painterly -- fine discriminations between shades, delicate notation of combined colors (silver-gray, greenish-white) and a precise tracing of the borderings that mark leaf from "satin underleaf" or that distinguishes a confused mass of ferns from the light that is slightly behind them. It is a moment of rapt attention, precise, discriminating, comprehensive, moving in an orderly and yet spontaneous passage, a passage not transitive in an effort to achieve an end, not teleological, but rather one of circulation -- in and among and around. The poet's close friend and colleague Robert Lowell writes in a late poem: "The painter's eye is not a lens/it trembles to caress the light." A lens is an implement used to focus light rays in a certain way, with the aim of clarity of representation. But the painter's eye caresses the light, becomes one with it, meets it in an ecstatic embrace, and sees not merely by means of it but in and among and according to it, immersed in it as in a fluid medium. In Levinas we find the idea that in erotic experience the hand does not search for any type of

information in the flesh of the beloved; rather, the caress moves in and according to the beloved's body in a non-directed, non-teleological fashion, merely feeling, a context in which the idea of interpreting signs is inapplicable. In a similar way, there are no significances to be decoded here in this moment; the poet is not interrogating the scene before her for signs which might indicate this or that: likewise, there are no symbolic overtones. Here, to a remarkable degree, the ambivalence of representation and of perception, the anxious negotiation of percept and idea, experience and concept, is left behind; the poet forgets the duplicity of signs, forgets almost the diacritical nature of language itself and uses it instead as a pictorial medium, attempting to capture a pure presence by means of -- ironically -- the fine distinctions between color words and directional indicators -- almost the emptiest words in language. Because of this very emptiness, and the semantic freedom it allows -- to simply move, follow, paint, say -- these are used to capture what is devoid of meaning to begin with, what is not an affair of meaning and has no connection to the duplicity of signs. Here in this stanza the poet relaxes for once. She simply sees. Yet though simple -- and what could be simpler? -- it is a moment of profound liberation. Is it the case that here, finally, for once, she returns to her senses, retrieves them from the northern ice box, the iceberg land where they had remained for so long? Despite her eye's painterly bravura and deadly accuracy was there not something disquieted and troubled in her relation to the natural world and in fact to existence itself? -- that horrifying fish, those ugly whites and blacks, that gnawed-through porous landscape; even the impending storms, though bracing and fantastic, were yet impending, worrisome, and dangerous. Here nothing impends except light and the almost disembodied colors of these endless and immemorial flowers and ferns. Seldom before in

her writing had she allowed sheer sense perception such freedom and her style the analogous freedom to follow it unburdened by any ambivalence, ambiguity, or subtle shifting away from the immediate and toward the inherent unlikeness of allegory.

I can think of only one other instance, the piece called “A Cold Spring,” the title poem of her second volume, where we find something similar:

A cold spring:
 the violet was flawed on the lawn.
 For two weeks or more the trees hesitated;
 the little leaves waited,
 carefully indicating their characteristics.
 Finally a grave green dust
 settled over your big aimless hills.
 One day, in a chill white blast of sunshine,
 on the side of one a calf was born.
 The mother stopped lowing
 and took a long time eating the after-birth,
 a wretched flag,
 but the calf got up promptly
 and seemed inclined to feel gay.

The next day
 Was much warmer.
 Greenish-white dogwood infiltrated the wood,
 Each petal burned, apparently, by a green cigarette-butt:
 And the blurred redbud stood
 Beside it, motionless, but almost more
 Like movement than any placeable color.
 Four deer practiced leaping over your fences.
 The infant oak-leaves swung through the sober oak.
 Song-sparrows were wound up for the summer,
 And in the maple the complimentary cardinal
 Cracked a whip, and the sleeper awoke,
 Stretching miles of green limbs from the south.
 In his cap the lilacs whitened,
 Then one day they fell like snow.
 Now, in the evening,
 A new moon comes.
 The hills grow softer. Tufts of long grass show

Where each cow-flop lies.
 The bull-frogs are sounding,
 Slack strings plucked by heavy thumbs.
 Beneath the light, against your white front door,
 The smallest moths, like Chinese fans,
 Flatten themselves, silver and silver-gilt
 Over pale yellow, orange, or gray.
 Now, from the thick grass, the fireflies
 Begin to rise:
 Up, then down, then up again:
 Lit on the ascending flight,
 Drifting simultaneously to the same height,
 --- exactly like the bubbles in champagne.
 --- Later on they rise much higher.
 And your shadowy pastures will be able to offer
 These particular glowing tributes
 Every evening now throughout the summer.

Here we also see moments of pure immediacy, and yet even here there is a difference in the mere fact that it is not a single moment but a description of a process that extends over a period of time. The temporal passage, to be sure, is born lightly by the writing: it is not lamented, say, or made a big issue of in some other fashion. It is simply there, the medium in which all things are. And that is perhaps part of the point. And yet even this moves the perception of the world, of existence, into a different key. Perhaps we might say that it defines the idea of a moment more broadly, so that it includes an entire season. And yet even here, the apprehension of the world, extended over time, must be made up of numerous point-like moments, which comprise the main portion of the poem and form its basic material. Each one, however, cannot be stayed with for very long; and so the piece as a whole is more about a landscape and a climate, and a general attitude toward them -- one of deep appreciation; it is this rather than a mimesis of perception itself. In that sense, we might say that it marks a point on the way to what we see here in the first stanza of "Brazil," but that it is not quite there as yet. As strange as it

might seem, this first stanza of “Brazil” in itself does seem to mark a turning point in the author’s work; it indicates a fundamental change in her attitude toward the world and her perception of it, conveyed admittedly in condensed form, in its essential ground note as it were. It is a brief yet resonant moment out of which much could come.

Yet in fact nothing comes of it at the time; the poem departs from this mode and moves into two different ones, and what is done in the first stanza is taken up in a sort of dialectical fashion to emerge in the context transmuted wholly and invested with different themes and concerns. For this reason, I would like to leave the piece for now and return to complete our examination of it later. In the meantime, we must follow out some of the implications of just this first stanza, just this first moment in itself. What *does* come from it?

In the middle of the volume are some beautiful but easily overlooked pieces which suggest a change in the poet’s experience at a deep level. “Electrical Storm” and “Song for the Rainy Season” both show a kind of domesticity within nature, a way of living in and among the natural world, that seems new; with this there is also a spirit of appreciation that imbues the writing, an appreciation of things as they are in their immediate existence, in their literal presence and simplicity, and accordingly the writing is direct and factual, and much less oriented to brilliant metaphors and images. It does not attempt to dazzle the reader so much as to inhabit, to shape itself around, the thing itself. Description depicts with the same painterly intention we see in “Brazil,” though the almost hypnotized stasis we noted there is gone in favor of something more active and attuned to the rhythms of actual living. There is a kind of peace and quiet joy in the poems which is not reduced even by obvious inconveniences and discomforts, and a

philosophical equanimity takes in stride what might be seen as somewhat primitive living conditions (at least by north American standards). What is the source of this quiet satisfaction in what is very simple? Does it have to do, among other things, with leaving the north American regime and its manifold repressions? No longer having to participate in them, no longer having to be a part of them, even if only a passive, unwilling, and implicitly dissident part? One must not forget that the poet has a very strong sense of the destructiveness of that regime, quite simply -- capitalism -- and of the ways that it corrupts relations between self and world and between persons. It was she, after all, who, in the guise of the man-moth, had to devise in imagination a means of surviving in the concrete tunnels below ground and in the above-ground labyrinth of the city to which she had been consigned, and it was she who imagined a kind of pure escape, in the act of daydreaming over a map, a map that capital itself had nonetheless already defined. Yet most clearly and with startling clarity -- in that startling and effortless poem "Varick Street" -- it is the bristly-nosed giant belching toxins and presiding over an eerie and noxious urban landscape in which all personal relations are likewise corrupted, corroded from within by a not very subtle complicity, and in advance.

At night the factories
 Struggle awake,
 Wretched uneasy buildings
 Veined with pipes
 Attempt their work.
 Trying to breathe,
 The elongated nostrils
 Haired with spikes
 Give off such stench, too.
And I shall sell you sell you
Sell you of course, my dear, and you'll sell me.

The refrain is repeated three times with no variation, as though to hammer the point right into our heads. But here, now, elsewhere, away from there, everything is different:

Electrical Storm

Dawn an unsympathetic yellow.
Cra-aack! --- dry and light.
 The house was really struck.
Crack! A tinny sound, like a dropped tumbler.
 Tobias jumped in the window, got in bed –
 Silent, his eyes bleached white, his fur on end.
 Personal and spiteful as a neighbor's child,
 Thunder began to bang and bump the roof.
 One pink flash;
 Then hail, the biggest size of artificial pearls.
 Dead-white, wax-white, cold –
 Diplomats' wives favors
 From an old moon part –
 They lay in melting windrows
 On the red ground until well after sunrise.
 We got up to find the wiring fused,
 No lights, a smell of saltpetre,
 And the telephone dead.

The cat stayed in the warm sheets.
 The Lent trees had shed all their petals:
 Wet, stuck, purple, among the dead-eye pearls.

Is it necessary to have absolute control of one's surroundings? Is it even possible?

The world of the man-moth is filled with battered moonlight but also with the artificial light of subway terminals and cars, which must, of course, run on schedule. There is thus control, precise order. And even this battered moonlight creates the effect in the reader's mind of artificial light, as though the entire world were a rat lab. There is a mastery of the environment everywhere implied, a sealing out, a sealing in, an absolute regulation, right down to the flow of electrons through the conductive material of the third rail. But here, now, in this new world, things do not have to be quite so neat and hermetically perfect.

This interior is partly open to the literal powers of the heavens -- themselves unharnessed, free; it is a startling occurrence, the lightning -- and in its pink actuality it is, I believe, simply lightning and not poetic inspiration. Nonetheless, the inhabitants take things in stride -- except for the rather high strung cat. On top of that, though potentially dangerous, there is yet real beauty created -- if one looks, if one is prepared to look, if one is not overly preoccupied with one's own security (that quintessential American word) so that one misses the basic fact, the actuality of the world in its literalness and in its detail -- here, melting windrows of hail on red ground, a wonderful image if you frame it in your mind, and yet not a symbol of anything I can think of, unless perhaps of the transience of beauty itself. John Cage said that his objective, in his capacity as visionary teacher, was to make people free without making them foolish. It is an indication of a cultural divide, that Elizabeth Bishop, in her old-fashionedness and reticence, would never think to make anyone anything at all. Yet there is an analogous spirit in this poem, for there is a wonderful freedom in it -- of versification to begin with, for her quite irregular, and of language itself -- a diction ranging from the elegance of "melting windrows" to simply "*cra-aaak*"; and finally of this nearness of the inside to the outside, for this interior seems as far from a Victorian one, say, as it is possible to imagine and seems itself a kind of outdoors. In this respect it reminds one a bit of Thoreau's cabin in *Walden* which at certain seasons is also permeable to the outside and the elements, which fill it with pleasant air and light. Yet, as with Thoreau too, there is no foolishness at all -- but rather a sensible wariness and caution: in the amusing yet onomatopoeically vivid lines about the thunder, or in the watchful taking note that we see in the last three lines of the main stanza (immediately modulated into impressions of beauty and comfort (for the cat) in the

last three lines of all). The critic Barbara Comins writes about the role of surprise in Bishop's poetry.[2] Here in the new land there must have been even more opportunities for surprise, that state in which the world is momentarily rendered strange and so renewed.

A similar set of attitudes can be seen in the second poem "Song for the Rainy Season," and in fact the two works seem like companion pieces. Here the whole idea of an interior open to the elements is pushed a step further, as we are shown an unusual dwelling that was built very close to a seasonal waterfall fed by the rainy season downpours, a kind of poor man's Fallingwater, the experimental house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright for a wealthy Connecticut client that incorporates part of a small stream and waterfall. Wright's concept, in verbal terms, was the idea of a mutual coexistence of human dwelling place and natural topography (the house is built into and as it were around the side of a small cliff with its stream and falls), seasonal rhythms, and the elements themselves.[3] Is it possible for these two dimensions -- Humanity and Nature -- to intersect without violating each other? If the answer is yes, then we must search for this way, since it must be the pathway to utopia itself. Here we have a very similar idea, though in a less ambitious, and less grandiose formulation; it would appear, however, to be one manifested by chance rather than planned, and one does have a feeling that this house is not the most "clean" and "comfortable" that ever existed, again using those terms in their typical north American sense.

Hidden, oh hidden
In the high fog
The house we live in,
Beneath the magnetic rock,
Rain-, rainbow-ridden,
Where blood-black

Bromelias, lichens,
 Owls, and the lint
 Of the waterfalls cling,
 Familiar, unbidden....

House, open house
 To the white dew
 And the milk-white sunrise
 Kind to the eyes,
 To membership
 Of silver fish, mouse,
 Bookworms,
 Big moths; with a wall
 For the mildew's
 Ignorant map;

Darkened and tarnished
 By the warm touch
 Of the warm breath,
 Maculate, cherished,
 Rejoice!

Its virtues are different, rather, and the poet chooses different terms with which to celebrate it. "House, open house/to the white dew," she says, again in terms that recall passages in *Walden* in which Thoreau attempts to portray his own dwelling in somewhat utopian terms:

The utopia or good place is not necessarily a physical location, though it is not merely "a state of mind" either, to invoke that American cliché that suggests all problems are solvable by means of the right attitude; rather it is a companionship, yet one conducted in a hospitable context, which means one that allows nature its freedom to speak and to inspire, allows to humans the freedom of an unharrassed sensibility, such that one is capable of responding, and, finally, allows them also a certain personal freedom and privacy. The "we" of the poem is not described or explained: we don't know who it is (though we may suspect it is not Miss Breen, the former police captain of Glens

Falls, New York). We know from Bishop's biography that it was not a man, and so the freedom and privacy I refer to were perhaps especially important for her. It has -- this word we -- only one thing: in its one syllable, it suggests just this simplicity of unity itself, of "not-aloneness"; it is the highlight in the pearl of domesticity, just as, later, as we will see, a mere metal can becomes the highlight in the pearl of the world. It is an ordinary and common thing, which yet is worth everything. And yet it is a small pearl -- this we -- it is nothing special, although genuine; and so its highlight, likewise small, and yet also genuine, does not need to be described; rather it just simply is -- we. Yet like one of the tropical plants themselves, it can flourish only in the right place and under the right conditions.

THE RIVERMAN/THE VOCATION OF KNOWING

This fascinating narrative is based on Brazilian folk-lore. The author's note reads:

[A man in a remote Amazonian village decides to become a *sacaca*, a witch doctor who works with water spirits. The river dolphin is believed to have supernatural powers; Luandinha is a river spirit associated with the moon; and the pirarucu is a fish weighing up to four hundred pounds. These and other details on which this poem is based are from *Amazon Town*, by Charles Wagley.]

The poem is, therefore, a first person narrative spoken by the man in question and relates the tale of his initiation and transformation. He not only learns various types of lore and magic, but he becomes something different than what he was, and in fact something other

than human. One would think that these piece certainly a departure for the author in her use of folklore, would prompt some fresh ideas among critics. Yet this seems not to have been the case.

Three times now I've been there.
 I don't eat fish anymore.
 There is fine mud on my scalp
 And I know from smelling my comb
 That the river smells in my hair.
 My hands and feet are cold.
 I look yellow, my wife says,
 And she brews me stinking teas
 I throw out, behind her back.

In this other-than-human condition he has access to what we might think of as the inner workings of nature. It is a sorcerer's apprentice tale -- or the beginning of it, but it is a remarkably ecological one.

Look, it stands to reason
 That everything we need
 Can be obtained from the river.
 It drains the jungles; it draws
 From trees and plants and rocks
 From half around the world,
 It draws from the very heart
 Of the earth the remedy
 For each of the diseases --
 One just has to know how to find it.
 But everything must be there
 In that magic mud, beneath
 The multitudes of fish,
 Deadly or innocent,
 The giant *pirarucus*,
 The turtles and crocodiles,
 Tree trunks and sunk canoes,
 With the crayfish, with the worms
 With tiny electric eyes
 Turning on and off and on.
 The river breathes in silt
 And breathes it out again,

And all is sweetness there
In the deep, enchanted silt.

This is actually the heart of what the apprentice has learned so far, and pursuing his insights further, and in the necessary detail, has become his main motivation. It is a vision of the wholeness of nature, of course, and of its self-renewing dynamism and balances. The river here is seen as itself a kind of organism which achieves and maintains its own homeostasis: it breathes in and breathes out, and anything noxious is purified in this profound respiration; indeed it is so profound that it involves the core of the earth itself which is envisaged as a heart. We might see the passage as looking forward to the so called Gaia hypothesis yet also backward to the visions of organic wholeness familiar from romantic poetry and philosophy.[4] Here, however, there is no god or spirit term; spirit instead is conceived in pagan or folk terms as various local powers with special and restricted influence. But there is nothing which governs the whole except itself. The self-governing of the whole is perhaps an obscure prompting to the speaker. There must be some reason he is listening at his window sill. For god to be dead does not mean that everything is permitted; it means, rather, that *we* are permitted, and that the human vocation is to achieve self-awareness, which includes knowledge of the natural world without any special help coming from some dimension beyond. As with almost all her poetry, the beyond is ruled out; there are spirits, but they are nature spirits, as in so many folk traditions. There is thus the question of why -- why do this? (And certainly it is a lot of trouble.) It cannot be because of a vocation, a call, from elsewhere; there must be another reason. It is interesting to consider that, unlike many such tales, he does not desire this insight and magic for his own personal gain, for personal aggrandizement or

revenge but rather for the common good. It is another “we” poem, but this time the we is expanded to include the entire fictional village. At a deeper level, it is a we that actually extends to include all the inhabitants of the earth, which after all is merely the logical extension of this one Amazon village.

Its real subject, therefore, is the so-called global village, yet not the one of neo-liberal imaginings where satellite communication links everyone by means of cell phones, while yet every individual remains locked in his or her own little career. It is rather the actual global village -- the condition of the majority of the people on the surface of the earth. It is for these that the shaman in training wishes to exert himself:

When the moon burns white
 And the river makes that sound
 Like a primus pumped up high –
 That fast, high whispering
 Like a hundred people at once –
 I'll be there below,
 As the turtle rattle hisses
 And the coral gives the sign,
 Traveling fast as a wish...
 Godfathers and cousins,
 Your canoes are over my head;
 I hear your voices talking.
 You can peer down and down
 Or dredge the river bottom
 But never, never catch me.
 When the moon shines and the river
 Lies across the earth
 And sucks it like a child,
 Then I will go to work
 To get you health and money.
 The Dolphin singled me out;
 Luandinha seconded it.

What is so moving about the poem, therefore, is the speaker's wonderful innocence: thoughts of personal gain seem never to have entered his mind. Perhaps it is

because of some special virtue he possesses, and this is the reason that the dolphin, in its wisdom, singles him out, and the goddess, in her even greater wisdom, approves. But it may be that they see in him other things as well -- courage, a strong constitution, or what-have-you. Rather the striking lack of selfishness might be more a part of the culture itself, rather than a peculiar virtue of this individual. The speaker and his tale are strange not only because of the Amazonian phantasmagoria, but for this deeper reason: his striking lack of selfish interest and his primarily communal motivation, which contrast so strongly with so many of the mythological and ideological motifs that we absorb from childhood on, where the focus is on the personal career of the individual -- their quest, if not for wealth and power, then for personal illumination, individual salvation, or unusual distinction of whatever kind in which they stand out from the crowd and are then admired by others. There are so many examples one hardly would know where to begin to enumerate them, and in fact the very idea of personal salvation is an essentially religious motif at the heart of Christianity itself. The poet has skillfully revised all of this. In fact, one might almost not notice her revisions at first, since she has retained so much traditional mythological machinery -- the magical beast that calls one to one's vocation, the act of rising up by oneself at night for a special nocturnal encounter, the journey to the underworld, and so forth, and yet she has enlivened all of it with her special vividness, freshness of imagery, and wit. There is also a complete freedom from excessive moral earnestness or any tendentious quality. On the contrary, there is a genial humor. But precisely for these reasons the inner significance of the tale penetrates that much more deeply when we do reflect on it and is that much more affecting. We realize that his character is unselfish but that this is a reflection of his culture, a culture of sharing rather

than one of ambition and self-interest. His vocation, moreover, does not come from beyond; it is not religious, in fact, it is not even magic but scientific: he desires to know the nature of nature, its inner order and law; he has a dim intuition of it but wants knowledge in detail, which he knows is the only true and effective kind. The roots of actual science are in fact in magic, alchemy, and the like. The poet returns to the source of the entire human effort to understand the world in a methodical, organized, and comprehensive fashion, to develop true knowledge as opposed to fortuitous insights and intuitive guesses, as important as those are. Moreover, it presents an image of the true nature of the scientific vocation in its purest form, undistorted by the economic and institutional, corporate, and military factors which, in our time, so often do distort it. It presents the individual called in a vocation not from a beyond but by the real itself and desiring to know this -- the real -- ever more deeply; and because the only real result of research is knowledge, its natural benefactor is humankind in general, the mortal knowers.

TWELFTH MORNING/THE NEW CINEMA AND THE POOR CHURCH

Along with certain pieces by Wordsworth this is the most moving poem that I know about poverty. A similar reticence links them, in fact, a tact with regard to the other person that is so great that it refrains from any attempt to guess what that other is feeling

or thinking. Their subjectivity remains opaque behind the representation, correspondingly clear, of their circumstances. Yet because the poet, in both cases, refrains from violating the interiority of another mind and sensibility, there is no need felt to portray these external circumstances in any way that might be thought to reflect this subjectivity and its particular burden -- destitution; and so an objectivity and freshness of perception is possible with regard to setting -- place and time, weather, clothing and gesture. All seem to be just as they would be. For this reason too there can be accident; and thus they inhabit the same world as we do and share the same freedom and the same secrecy -- these two things together rendering them inviolable. This is the source of their dignity; this dignity, always quietly felt and essentially unemphasized, almost unstated, together with their poverty creates the deep pathos that emanates from them. Why a leech gatherer? Why the discharged soldier wandering by himself on the road at night? Why in fact Newton with his plummet-measured face, voyaging through strange seas of thought, alone. And the only possible answer is that -- given the chances of the world -- they might be us, we might be them. And yet though this is true and entails a common link between us -- humanity -- in their essential silence -- and they are silent even if they speak -- they remain a mystery. It is a mystery which we all share but which none can express -- that of being human, one of the mortal knowers. And this perhaps is the key: the whole tenor of the presentation is such as to convey at last one thing above all: that they do not inhabit a plane of knowledge less than that of the author, or the reader.

Bishop's style does not have, does not want, the noted gravity we see in Wordsworth. Quite the opposite; she aspires to a lighter touch, though not too light. And so there is a lesser degree of depth and pathos as well. Yet she achieves at least here a

similar effect. The silence of the boy, even though he is singing; the silence of his being, that is, and then of his thoughts; his mysterious dignity, even though he has nothing, is known to us by only a single name, Balthazar, and is one of the unimportant, lost in the wastes of history, to which he has been consigned -- all of this is given to us with an effortless clarity and objectivity. And yet it is a beautiful place, too, even though there is almost nothing there but sand. How clearly the odd beauty and mystery, the special atmosphere, of this strange and empty land are conveyed right from the beginning:

We are off in a corner of nowhere; and there seems also to be no time as well. It is morning, of course, yet the mist makes everything vague, and Balthazar might as easily be walking toward us out of the near or remote past, like a ghost. The Christian reference is deeply affecting, a unique moment in the poet's work, once it is recognized, and it might easily not be for quite a while, given the absorbing realism of the style and the fact that we know this to be a foreign place and might therefore think that maybe that's just a common name for boys there, and indeed perhaps it is. But it is also the name of one of the Wise Kings in the Christian legend, one of those who recognize the world historical event when it occurs, though they do so but dimly. What does this Balthazar recognize? The wise kings also bring gifts -- gold, frankincense, and myrrh, precious things -- commodities -- but symbols as well, and, in the context of the legend, offerings. Here the gift is water -- plain and simple, but no doubt precious in this place that seems to be all sand. True, the sea is at hand. But the sea is salt -- thus, we have sea water that cannot quench thirst and land that can grow nothing. This is the true wasteland, and the gift of water to a mere animal is itself a great recognition, though it is not that of a world historical event. We must note that there are always two churches -- the splendid church,

which deals with things like world historical events, and was one of them, and which in its heart craved gold and much else. (This is the church of which Whitehead observed, “When the west accepted Christianity, Caesar conquered, and the received texts of western theology were edited by his lawyers.”) And then there is another church, the poor church. Perhaps its central mythical figure is not even Christ, or just barely, a certain Christ let us say, but even more, it is St. Francis, who has nothing and gives it away regardless, who preaches to the birds and who is the authentic redeemer of the destitute. He and Christ divide between them the poor church, the true one. It is a fact, however, that these two churches are not merely versions of each other, like two sides of a coin. Rather they are mortal enemies and are always in conflict; it is a real historical conflict, and not a legendary one, and is played out even now in the difference between, say, the machinations of *Opus Dei* on the one hand and the exertions of actual Catholic priests and nuns inspired by so-called liberation theology in the countries of Latin America.[5]

The poet has again deftly revised the myth uppermost in peoples’ minds, since at the time of its writing (around 1952) it was the reactionary Catholicism that had taken on a certain allure for various Anglo-American writers. Here we see something different, and the mood of the ending -- haunted by silence, like the rest of the poem -- is like nothing so much as Passolini’s *Gospel of Mathew*, which is itself of course mostly silent.

What is it that has caused this housewreck, which must actually be the foundering of an entire area or region and not merely of a single house? The poet intimates that “the company” must have something to do with it. Exactly what or how remains unspecified. Yet the phrase “passes off” suggests deception and cheating of some sort. People are being cheated. But this is the general way here. For this reason a melancholy hangs over

the scene. Beauty and mystery had prevented it from coming through at first, but it is noted slightly as though in passing in the third stanza.

The sea's off somewhere, doing nothing. Listen.
An expelled breath. And faint, faint, faint
(or are you hearing things), the sandpiper's
heart-broken cries.

The poem picks up a bit in its mood through its middle section. A playful wit returns and a funny reversal of perspective, and the painterly eye is once again in evidence noting, noting, noting, with all of its amusement, curiosity, and love. In fact more than even most of her pieces, the poem seems to progress as a succession of pictures. There is a pronounced concision in the quatrains which works against elaboration, and the poet places the emphasis on images developed in clear and elemental language. These seem to be composed as a sequence of shots, the penultimate consisting of the three stanzas that bring together horse, dune, foundered house, and boy. If we compose the image carefully in the mind, stepping back a bit from the words that convey it, it is a homely piece of surrealism, the natural surrealism that we happen upon when unusual circumstances prevail in nature. The last image, the last shot as it were -- the poem seems to become cinema at this point -- is again best perceived by standing back a bit from the words -- and then seeing in the mind's eye the boy watering the horse, hearing the sound of the water in our mind, and the sound -- surely it is soft -- of his singing under his breath while he does his chores, telling himself, and perhaps the horse and the empty unlistening world, that it is his birthday.

This standing back a bit from the words that I have suggested as the best way to read this poem seems to me to be a peculiar feature of its style and to be produced by the combination of a careful composition of the images, the natural and rather basic quality

of these images, and the relative conciseness of the linguistic medium itself. Despite the poet's humor and important tonal nuances, it is as if words want to disappear, leaving only the world to speak in its visual and audible presence. It is a style that is sometimes called plain, photographic, transparent -- yet none of these will do. It is not really plain, and no writing is either photographic or transparent. But it seems indicative of a kind of ethical intention on the part of the writer: *see not my writing but see this*, it says. The *this* in question must be nothing other than the poverty, and the beauty as well; the two somehow heightening each other's pathos. Why should a world containing this beauty contain also this destitution, this sadness -- and finally the lack of sadness, and this heightens the pathos all the more -- the boy in his innocence, his beauty and youth (the two here the same) and his resilience -- how mysterious he is, how strong and how fragile, how absolutely endangered, like the world itself. How long will these last, his youth and beauty? one wonders. It is, after all, his birthday -- time is passing, even as there is, in this stilled moment of apprehension, in which we see the mystery of another so like us and yet so unlike, the feeling not so much of time but of the presence of the other, and of the waste of life itself.

The pieces we have looked at in this section are all moments in the writer's process of engagement with this new place and the new life she hopes for. They mark out a gradual discovery -- first of a physical environment and, at the same time, and more importantly, of a way -- new for her -- of being in it -- more innocently open, as one might think of it, or, if not actually innocent, at least marked by a willingness to be so, taking it as worthy to be a positive goal, if we understand innocence as a freedom from

cynicism. And if one persists, then perhaps there blossoms -- like one of those huge flowers she recorded -- an ability actually to be so, at least at times -- at least some of those times, recorded for us as exemplary instances and captured with her unique vividness. Yet a receptiveness to a different way of life, to different habits and values and ideals above all is implicit in this. Why be receptive in this way? Why put aside one's cynicism, one's ambition and self-absorption? Are these not in sum one's capacity for self-defense in the -- in the where? Even the ability to write one thing and yet mean another -- not lying, of course, but rather engaging in irony, that badge of the sophisticate, and then the allegorical impulse itself, by which one encodes fragments of experience, as though at a remove, the remove of contemplation attempting to achieve comprehension and requiring, therefore, a shorthand, a code, silent markers like street signs pointing to the end of days, and in doing so pointing out, also, the arbitrary relation between sign and meaning -- even this capacity, and the interest in it, and the need for it, must be not abandoned, but rather its hold loosened in the interest of cultivating a different relationship between self and world. For those habits -- is that not what they are, finally? -- are the means after all, the straight and crooked gate by which one enters the region of unlikeness, the land of reifications and commodifications, and the necessarily ironic responses to them, the land of the iceberg. Yet at times, within some at least, a new need arises -- to give up all of this, or to attempt to do so, to attempt, as a resource and a resonance, and as a kind of imperative laid upon one by what one sees and hears, by what one witnesses, here in the new world, a different attunement and a new dispensation.

Yet values come from people, people in specific places, and times; in the process of feeling one's way into the new culture, one naturally comes to know any

number of people, these strangers, alien, threatening, fascinating, heartbreaking. Or does one? In this last poem here, and in a certain way in “The Riverman” one is on the threshold of this knowledge. And yet this threshold has not yet been crossed; the domestic “we” of those beautiful house poems, poems of domesticity and nature at once, and also of the unspoken rapport with the other who is like oneself, almost another self, must be displaced somewhat from center stage in order to make room for those others who are here and who have been here, and who are not like us at all. And yet, is it possible to know them? And what are the difficulties?

MANUELZINO/NEW MASTER AND NEW SLAVE

The biggest obstacle to knowing the other is distance; the author’s situation is such that she is able to partially overcome this, but only to a degree. When physical distance is not the issue, then other factors intervene. In her case, since she is actually there, living in Brazil, there is a natural opportunity for direct encounter. Yet there are still the barriers of language and class. With respect to language one has the impression from the two pieces here that she can understand the language but that she does not speak it much. At least in her self-representation she is entirely an observer and not an interlocutor or participant. Thus in “Under the Window” she overhears bits of conversation going on around a village fountain. Yet she does not herself appear in any of these scenes; likewise in “Going to the Bakery” the poet’s focus is mostly on visual description, as it so often is. Even the encounter with the Black man under the tree seems

mostly silent. She gives him money but few words are exchanged. And they are formulaic. And yet she seems to know the language well enough to be able to tell when he is speaking nonsense. It is, of course, possible for one to be able to understand a language but not be able to speak it that well. Further, speaking is not merely producing sounds. It involves being able to fit into the social schema that the language in part is and in part reinforces; to speak is to do more than speak. It is to know the idioms and the style of expression, to have a feeling for these as well as for the rhythms and patterns of conversation and in fact of social interaction generally as it is carried on in this unfamiliar culture. It is, in a way, a kind of acting, and yet it is a part that one can never really learn. It is virtually impossible to pass as a native; some can do it, though few, and none who go to the new place in middle age. The best one can hope for is an approximation that one hopes will be received with indulgence, and this itself imposes limits. Shy persons will not do well. In addition, awkwardness with the language italicizes other estranging factors -- and specifically those of economic class. The speaker, therefore, seems immured in her own silence, and an anthropological distance works against actual relationship.

As we have mentioned, class does as well, and crucially. The poverty is evident in both pieces. The speaker is wonderfully observant, humane, and not in the least condescending, and is in addition, completely free of pious blather or righteous indignation and the like; the writing has no tendentious aspect. Yet still the poverty she records places her on one side, and her neighbors on the opposite side, of a great divide, that between (comparatively) rich and poor. The degree of poverty is actually not represented very clearly; it is sensed here and there in certain details but is never really

placed at the center of the reader's awareness. The poetry is not about that but about recording the look and feel of this foreign land. Her admission to its culture and to the political reality that lies within that goes as far as her eye, her ear, and that portion of the mind that sympathizes. The report of eye and ear create the arresting aesthetic achievement of the poetry; and sympathy is a noted bourgeois emotion. One could perhaps say, then, that the evocation of this poverty and the desperation it leads to, as in the ballad "The Burglar of Babylon," remains somewhat abstract and sketchy in the work, in a way somewhat analogous to what we saw in the last section of "At the Fishhouses." And perhaps the most telling and profound evocation does in fact come in the great poem "Twelfth Morning," with its silent mystery and tactful respect.

Yet certainly the most elaborate representation of these issues is seen in "Manuelzhino." The poem is a great and irresistible comic masterpiece, perhaps on the level of Chaucer. The first thing to note is that it is another dramatic monologue, just as "The Riverman" was. It is not the author speaking. This was obvious, of course, in the case of the latter poem. We know that Elizabeth Bishop was never in training to become an Amazonian shaman; yet in the case of this piece, it might be easy to assume that the speaker is a thin disguise for the author herself. Yet I believe this would be a mistake. For here, as sometimes in Chaucer, we are given a speaker who does not seem to understand fully the events he or she relates. Instead she makes an assumption of knowledge or insight that exceeds what she actually possesses. The overt comedy may come from the events related, but there is a more subtle satire directed against the speaker per se. We are given the image of a partially knowing, partially perceptive individual; perhaps we see them in the process of learning, or, on the other hand, it may be that things will always

remain beyond them. When work such as this is done too broadly, it may be tendentious: an obvious fool is being shown up to the reader's superior and amused judgment. But when it is done more subtly, as here, we see instead and are given insight into something that goes beyond any individual folly or limitation -- the limitations and inaccuracies of understanding that are dispersed through the social environment and that are endemic to classes and groups and not just to individuals -- these are revealed. Perhaps we also sometimes see the way individuals can inflect these habits, change them, work against them, revising the social realm into the future by means of their own responses and reflections. This process might not be revolutionary by any means, but rather groping, hesitant, and contradictory. But in such ways things alter subtly and yet at a deep level within the texture of the social world and its cultural manifestations. It is not a question of psychology, particularly; typicality rather than peculiarity is the means by which it is accomplished; typical habits of thought which yet in certain one or two crucial ways, though not in all, are shown to be inadequate to their context.

In this poem, in contrast to the other pieces we have seen, the speaker is not at all silent but talks continually. Manuelzhino in the actual texture of the writing speaks only once in his own voice. Yet we are to understand that there is and has been a continual interaction between them, some of which are described though always from the speaker's point of view. Issues of language, therefore, do not seem relevant, and it is actually unclear whether the speaker is a Brazilian or a foreigner of some kind, though perhaps the first case is the more likely, since we are given to understand at the outset that the speaker's family has owned land in the area for some time. Class, therefore, is the fundamental issue. Related to this is a somewhat different one -- the vagueness of class in

transitional moments of history, when bourgeoisie are becoming impoverished or when peasantry are becoming proletariat. At such times, the issue of how one should relate to the other becomes unclear, since they are clearly different than they were; yet at the same time the basic system of relations is still extant. This creates gaps in immediate self-understanding and in the unreflective understanding of history and society which in turn are opportunities for change within the individuals in question. And this change may be either positive or negative. Yet often, historically, we see that such moments release intense reactionary tendencies, particularly of an irrational kind -- racism, xenophobia and the like. It is a question then of what is actually transpiring between the two characters, as opposed to merely what seems to be. One notices, for example, that she addresses him throughout and not the reader. She has a strange need to communicate with this semi-peasant, semi-squatter, semi-tenant farmer, would-be and surreptitious truck farmer for profit (behind her back). Why? one wonders. Does she need vegetables all that much? And he does bring her some, though perhaps without the efficiency she would like. What one sees here in particular is a bit like the process we detected hidden within the poem "the map." There it was the process of daydreaming that, burgeoning within the consciousness of the speaker, was already creating the *incipits* for a change of direction, a change of character of the social world. It must become other in order that such desires be fulfilled. What other? How? No one can say exactly, but something compatible with the desire in question and by means that likewise would be. Here it is carried out -- this dim tentative movement toward something more humane -- not by means of daydreams, but through dialogue, a dialogue which is quite one-sided it is true, but which is implicit in the whole situation.

The speaker's tone to begin with seems rather peremptory, yet in a way that we do not take seriously. There is a certain humor in this "summarizing" of another person by means of terse phrases and then an exaggerated impatience in the fifth line. The Christian reference is also noted but one probably does not think anything of it as yet; it seems simply part of the speaker's self-consciously exaggerating and self-dramatizing voice.

Half squatter, half tenant (no rent) –
 a sort of inheritance; white,
 in your thirties now, and supposed
 to supply me with vegetables,
 but you don't; or you won't; or you can't
 get the idea through your brain –
 the world's worst gardener since Cain.

In this passage, too, another third character begins to make its presence known, the landscape itself, which is lush and fertile, indeed a virtual garden of Eden. Despite the speaker's claims to the contrary, one has the impression that Manhuelzino is actually quite a good gardener, or at any rate that being "good" is not really necessary. In this place of natural fertility, things grow of their own, though they do require work. One suspects that the speaker does not really appreciate either reality very clearly. For it does seem that Manuelzhino's knowledge of gardening -- really more what we would call subsistence farming -- is greater than she credits him with, otherwise no gardens at all would "ravish her eyes." And it may also be that methods evidently learned from his father and grandfather may not seem efficient enough to the speaker, if she happens to have absorbed capitalist ideas of efficiency. Then too the sheer exhaustion of the work seems to escape her as well, though perhaps not entirely:

I watch you through the rain,
 trotting, light, on bare feet,
 up the steep paths you have made ---

or your father and grandfather made ---
 all over my property,
 with your head and back inside
 a sodden burlap bag,
 and feel I can't endure it
 another minute; then,
 indoors, beside the stove,
 keep on reading a book.

As we noted earlier, psychology is not exactly the point, and yet one cannot help but wonder what the speaker is actually thinking as she sits comfortably by her stove reading. Though somewhat arrogant, or at least with traits that border upon that, she yet is not an evil character. One might easily imagine that thoughts about the disparities and inequities of class must enter her mind, if only occasionally. Why indeed should he have to clamber barefoot up and down steep muddy slopes in the rain, and without even a proper mac to wear, while she sits by her stove, warm and dry and comfortable. There is an implicit chastisement perhaps in the very lines themselves -- arranged by the author for the speaker -- in the abruptness with which she breaks off and retreats to her kitchen. In this abruptness of transition there is a faltering of the will to self-assertion, albeit it would be a self-assertion expressed only in her own mind, or primarily, shared between herself and herself and herself and the reader. It is a moment of hesitation in which mere self-interest and perhaps more unthinking self-assertiveness, those two traits that accompany everyone at almost all times, are dispersed momentarily and the individual is driven back for a moment, like a crab into its cave, and one is forced to recognize the concrete existence of the other, if only for a moment.

In addition to not recognizing the difficulty of his work she also seems not to understand that he must have objectives of his own, quite apart from the role he must

play for her. Thus she is puzzled by the disappearance of her telephone wires (of all things, even I can't guess what he must do with them), and in particular by what she views as the peculiar eating habits he adapts and forces on his family.

You steal my telephone wires,
Or someone does. You starve
Your horse and yourself
And your dogs and family.
Among endless variety,
You eat boiled cabbage stalks.

Here her thinking is directly influenced by her class position: the bourgeois thinks in terms of choices; the unstated portion of the phrase "Among endless variety" is "to choose from". But for the peasant there is no such thing as choice, and for the worker little. Insofar as she actually knows what his family's eating habits are -- and this one may doubt, since that would require a degree of familiar intimacy that seems out of the question here -- they are no doubt motivated by considerations of economy; and one suspects that Manuelzhino, as I suggested earlier, is selling produce on the side to supplement his income. And perhaps he aspires to become a small-scale truck farmer at some point, that is, someone who would raise produce for more than just subsistence, but in part also for sale at local markets.

Patch upon patch upon patch,
Your wife keeps all of you covered.
She has gone over and over
(forearmed is forewarned)
Your pair of bright blue pants
With white thread, and these days
Your limbs are draped in blueprints.
You paint -- heaven knows why --
The outside of the crown
And brim of your straw hat.
Perhaps to reflect the sun?

The images in this strophe, though amusing, are also all ones that convey the idea of a poverty which can avoid destitution only by means of the greatest economy combined with constant labor. Thus in addition to work and the fatigue that goes with it, the peasant and the worker are subject to constant anxiety. One way to partly alleviate this is to save everything, or to take homemade reinforcing measures so that the article in question might last a little longer. Thus the wife's constant patching, which no doubt does make their clothes last longer; but this is also the reason for painting the hat brim, since if it tears or perhaps rots in the damp climate it will expose the wearer's eye and face to harsh sun. Whether painting the brim is effective in this way, I can't say, but something like this is no doubt the reason behind it. The speaker, seeing all this from her relative security and affluence, sees only the visual image -- which seems ludicrous -- but not the underlying set of needs that create it in the first place. The passage as a whole is an example of how the eye alone, in fact, is not enough. The apparent, the surface of the social world cannot after all necessarily provide insight into the truth of social experience. Only an analysis of motives can do that. In addition, the slight idealization of the mother that we in the first few lines, is another way realities and relationships are misunderstood by the speaker. The lines suggest a range of bourgeois and perhaps more accurately petty bourgeois clichés about motherhood and femininity. Yet the mother's actions are again merely expressions of economy, analogous to Manhuelzino painting his hat, though perhaps more effective. More to the point, these few lines to a degree, but really the entire poem, and in strongest terms, show the speaker's tendency, again typical of bourgeois and petty bourgeois ideology, of thinking of persons primarily in terms of their

perceived “character” or “personality,” as opposed to considering the sets of needs with which they are confronted, the objectives resulting from such, and their function within a larger system. Here, of course, the system in question is the so-called nuclear family familiar to us from political rhetoric. Yet we see it in something like its original function as a unit of survival in a context of scarcity. In this unit everyone must work as a team. As such the mother is merely performing hers -- as the children themselves are. And Manuelzhino his, though part of his is to extract more money or other valuables out of the narrator, while pretending to be a fool or incompetent. This clash of understandings is the basis of the comedy, yet it is itself based on two different needs the respective parties have. It is part of the nature of the bourgeois environment that needs multiply and become ever more refined: thus one needs respect, understanding, prestige, and so forth. For this reason she seems to need to be recognized by him, whereas the peasant has one very simple need -- survival, defined again in terms of the family unit.

Peasant survival requires more than work and saving; for often all one's efforts and one's austerities are still not enough, and something further is needed. One must, out of self-preservation and the preservation of one's family, stay within the law, and so illegal activities are actually a last resort, or an act of desperation or impulsive foolishness on the part of the young and inexperienced. Manuelzhino is past that stage, however. Yet it is instructive to consider for a moment the relationship between this poem and the ballad “The Burglar of Babylon,” found also in this volume. There, we see the result of such desperation and such impulse; but more we see the result of a further degree of social dislocation resulting from policies which make it impossible for peasants to remain on their land, if only in the marginal position of Manuelzhino. And perhaps in

some cases it is not strictly impossible for them to, but lured to the cities anyway by the promise of jobs that then do not materialize, they end up with only a limited number of options -- various types of criminality, prostitution and the like. How many economic steps is Manuelzhino removed from the fate of the burglar? And his wife from prostitution? Thus when we consider this larger picture, the rough outlines of which are sketched by the volume as a whole, we see that there is a much less benign, much less comic and more dire background to this particular poem's overt comedy. The need for what is often referred to as peasant cunning is quite definite. How is it shown?

Clearly, at various points he plays dumb or perhaps pretends to be somewhat eccentric or "inscrutable," as the old cliché was sometimes used regarding Asians. Thus, in the third section he pretends to have suspicions about whether his deceased father, whom they are about to bury, is really dead:

The family gathers, but you,
 No, you "don't think he's dead!
 I look at him. He's cold....
 I give you money for the funeral
 And you go and hire a bus
 For the delighted mourners,
 So I have to hand over some more
 And then have to hear you tell me
 You pray for me every night!

Such comments do seem rather strange, but rather than ascribe them to some sort of mental instability or perhaps superstition on the part of Manuelzhino, I would rather place them in the context of the overall situation with which he must deal, which, as I suggested earlier, is to extract as much from her as possible without seeming to ask for anything beyond the ordinary. It might be advantageous for a person in that situation to seem opaque or incomprehensible to the one with greater power and money, just as some

Black jazz musicians in the segregated US were said sometimes to feign eccentric behavior so that people, and perhaps especially the police, would be less inclined to meddle with them.

Perhaps the most painful part of the poem, though it is also the most amusing, occurs in the fifth section:

Or, briskly, you come to settle
 What we call our “accounts,”
 With two old copybooks,
 One with flowers on the cover,
 The other with a camel.
 Immediate confusion.
 You’ve left out the decimal points.
 Your columns stagger,
 Honeycombed with zeros.
 You whisper conspiratorially;
 The numbers mount to millions.
 Account books? They are Dream Books.
 In the kitchen we dream together
 How the meek shall inherit the earth –
 Or several acres of mine.

The obvious loss of dignity might be unpleasant to witness were it not in a sense prettified by the fanciful image of bluets and violets. Here is where we especially need to bear in mind that this is a character speaking, and not the poet, and it is the character’s trivializing and demeaning attitude that is shown here, complete with a cliché expression regarding the supposed irresponsibility of the lower orders improvident as the dawn, used any number of times by the British with regard to the Irish, the northern of the southern Italians, the American of the Mexicans and the like. The other is always a lazy bum, this despite the fact that one actually sees him working himself ragged up and down those narrow paths.

Is Manuelzhino in fact a peasant or is he rather a tenant farmer, a share cropper, albeit a sedentary rather than peripatetic one? Or is he an employee -- a gardener, as on an estate, which is actually how she first refers to him? There is a rich confusion in his basic situation and thus in their basic relationship. This confusion is something that he negotiates as best he can, exploiting it where possible, and it is something that she attempts to understand by means of concepts that have always the characteristic failing of placing too much emphasis on the individual and his supposed shortcomings and not enough on the larger structural issues. But this, of course, is typical or could even serve as a definition of bourgeois ideology. The speaker is only a petit bourgeois landlord of some kind, and so these mystifications and misunderstandings result in the picturesque grim comedy that we are presented with. When they are employed as deliberate obfuscation by the high bourgeoisie in conjunction with its governmental representatives, they result in the vicious policies that place Manuelzhino and others like him in his situation in the first place or, worse, the burglar Micucu in his (who then, to protect Law and Order, is hunted down, though not very efficiently, like a dog and shot). Yet every dog has if not his day at least a sense of his own basic dignity and so of what his day would be like if only he could get it. So the copybooks episode is an effort on Manuelzhino's part to recover his dignity to some extent. He must feel himself to be not an object of charity but rather a businessman and that theirs in a business relationship. Yet it may be something of an audacious move on his part as well, since this would also mean that it was no longer a quasi-feudal relationship either, which is how the speaker seems inclined to view it. This should be seen as a kind of fantasy construction on her part as well; in a way, they are both deluded. Neither of their self-concepts fits their

situation. M's obviously do not, but the high handed tone which at moments tempts the speaker, though she does not give in to it completely, also illustrates, though more subtly, a self-understanding that is not in tune with objective reality: quite simply, she is inclined to give herself airs. Manuelzhino's presentation of the account books would then be a kind of bid for independence, in effect his assertion that he is not, or is no longer, a servant but an independent agent, however precarious a role that might be.

And is he indeed playing a role once again in making this very bid? Is it perhaps a kind of emotional blackmail or threat? In the sense that he wishes to place a distance -- of ledger books -- between the two of them, reducing their relationship, such as it is, to the cash nexus merely. Might this be a way of insulting her, or at least of rebuffing a sensed emotional involvement with his and his family's affairs, however conflicted, that he senses in her? We might even see it as his way of putting her in her place over some excessive arrogance or presumption. Perhaps it is impossible to say, yet the scene becomes more poignant and absurd when we realize that he is in fact innumerate and probably illiterate as well (as both my own grandfathers also were). At any rate, the scene, despite its brevity, goes to the heart of the confused relationship that exists -- not between master and slave, for that is not the relationship here -- but between persons during times when the social means of production are altering such that previously clear class definitions are no longer clear. The rifts that open then are potential opportunities for a more humane existence to begin to develop, to begin to be learned by the persons in question, though they are also the rifts in history through which repressed and primitive impulses -- and sometimes violent ones -- may return to the social sphere in active form, as well as merely pointless ones -- such as the few scraps of Christianity that have made

their way into the speaker's monologue (which should be viewed as things which can affect nothing because they are of another time). Yet still the image of the two of them at night in her kitchen is relatively benign, and so the poem is a work of comedy rather than of tragedy.

QUESTIONS OF TRAVEL

"Questions of Travel" names both a poem and the volume as a whole. We will deal with the poem directly, but what concerns me now is the shape and proportions of the book. It seems in a way to have a kind of gap in the middle, and in fact two of the pieces I have used to support some of my remarks -- "Going to the Bakery" and "Under the Window" -- are not part of it but were published later. For if we think of the book as a whole as detailing the entrance into and exploration of another culture and another country, the physical country itself with its new sights and new experiences, and then within that, the social world with its political tensions and cultural history, then one has the impression of a voyage only partly completed, a transition, a transformation only partly realized, a work partly done and left in part still undone; it is as though we move forward toward this object, which yet retreats before us. For as the poems seem to

approach the question of who...who is here...who are these people...What do they think, want, and aspire to?...And then, What hinders them?...as soon as we begin to move into this territory, as we encounter some of the folklore in "The Riverman" and his quest, as we encounter Manuelzinho in his gardens, as we read the subtle masterpiece "Twelfth Morning," and then double back to the tragedy of "The Burglar of Babylon," there is a desire for a more complete encounter, a fuller account, a greater sense, too, of how these persons changed the narrator herself, that nervous woman who disembarked back in the introductory poem accompanied by Miss Breen, whose senses were so marvelously awakened by the flora and light of the rain forest, as well as by a way of living that seemed to promise a reprieve from the northern culture of strict utility, and money, and the corruption of relationships that seemed to go with these. But as we begin to want and expect some such account, there is a break; the Brazil poems stop and we are back up north, presented with a series of equally masterful tableaux, each satirical or critical in some way, each pushing forward the mode of veiled allegory we had seen before, yet with a careful eye for realistic detail, and so with even greater subtlety; each one devastating, therefore, in its own way. In this suite of poems, placed under the title *Elsewhere* the contrast between the lush and beautiful, though impoverished, land of Brazil and the world from which she originates is clear at every point: in "Manners" we see the stiffness, superficiality, and formality of social relations, in a social landscape equally barren, in which a trained crow becomes a bit of amusement; in "Sestina" we find the place of melancholia, where it is always raining; an interior once again, but one of gloom, restraint, and unspecified yet irremediable suffering. Perhaps the most startling of these pieces is the third, "First Death in Nova Scotia," where the artificiality of custom,

manners, and even décor, combined with a rather horrifying wake for a dead child, evokes everything morbid in late-Victorian and Edwardian culture and combines this with a bit of provincial cultural emptiness and sub-arctic bleakness just for good measure -- a truly ghastly little piece of work that captures indelibly a splinter of the north American iceberg. The poet is merciless, and nothing escapes her; her eye, alternately painterly in its sensuousness and photographic in its accuracy, misses nothing, so that even a short way into the post-war era, she yet captures accurately, in a small and deadly way, the most important of its numerous essential problems -- the filling station itself, that is, the economy of petrochemicals. Here in an entirely intuitive fashion, which yet delivers the truth, she grasps that it is all polluting in the most basic sense of the term.

Oh, but it is dirty!
 --- this little filling station,
 Oil-soaked, oil-permeated
 To a disturbing, over-all
 Black translucency.
 Be careful with that match!

Indeed it is, as it has taken most of us several decades beyond the date of the piece to learn. And yet she could see it instantly. She knows by instinct what is wholesome and what is noxious. Yet it is part of the culture of consumption to set about corrupting the natural responses by confusing them with other associations and impressions -- here a laughably unskillful attempt to make the place seem “elegant” “smart” “homey” or some such. And yet the filth and poison ooze through it all, permeating the entire enterprise and everyone connected with it. Here too there is the further question of *who*: some things are not immediately knowable, but can only be found through research and analysis. This, of course, the poem does not have. Yet research must start at least with clues and at least

some of these are to be seen, like artistic found objects, scattered through the social realm.

What question to ask is always the problem, and it is as if the poem's last two stanzas dramatize the beginnings of this research project. Not all the questions lead in the right direction.

Why the extraneous plant?
 Why the taboret?
 Why, oh why, the doily?
 (embroidered in daisy stitch
 with marguerites, I think,
 and heavy with gray crochet.)

Somebody embroidered the doily.
 somebody waters the plant,
 or oils it, maybe. Somebody
 arranges the rows of cans
 so that they softly say:
 Esso—so—so—so
 to high-strung automobiles.
 Somebody loves us all.

But almost as though by chance (though not really) a significant clue comes into focus -- that row of cans. Who is it indeed who is always thinking of us, figuring out ways to sell us more petroleum products? Could it be Esso? [] Miller] And who or what is that? But that, of course, would be a long story. Should you pursue it? Do you really want to? It depends on what you want out of life, as the saying is, and what you find an acceptable way of life. To be a consumer, passive in one's oil-soaked, and in fact blood-soaked cubicle (used for either domicile or work, alternately), rendered more comfortable by means of oil-soaked doily? Or does one rather want to be aware, to have a life of awareness? Is this the choice?

What is awareness, anyway? The poet illustrates this for us by a kind of negative example?

An endless and flooded
 Dreamland, lying low,
 Cross-and wheel-studded
 Like a tick-tack-toe.
 At the right, ancillary,
 “Mary”’s close and blue.
 Which Mary? Aunt Mary?
 Tall Mary Stearns I knew?...

Dream dream confronting
 Now the cupboard’s bare.
 The cat’s gone a-hunting.
 The brook feels for the stair.

[Sunday, 4 A.M.]

The poem is almost a perfect palinode, as it were, of the very first stanza we examined of “Brazil” with its luminous beauty and perfect clarity; here, by contrast, everything is bleared and confused and dim: time and space themselves are mixed up. We are presented with dream but not as phantasmagoria, in which we might find a man-moth, but in its inebriation, its confusion, its paralysis, its disorientation and incapacity. It is an Alzheimer’s world permeated with amnesia and disorientation. Is it merely a bad night, or merely because we went to bed so drunk? And is our drinking the result of having to work at the filling station or perhaps for the Esso company itself, as a sales representative no-doubt, or as a “marketing analyst”, or perhaps as speech writer for the CEO? Or do we work instead as an analyst at a Washington “think-tank” attempting to think up justifications for various policies variously and obscurely relevant. This would make anyone drink. Or perhaps it is a bolder metaphor for the general state of consciousness of those inhabiting the iceberg who find themselves asking *Who?* and *What?* and *Why?* but can never find a clear answer, since, like the speaker in “Manuelzinho,” they see only the immediate image and cannot grasp its underlying system, just as here fragments are clear

but artfully removed from their contexts, and we see that it actually doesn't take very much of this artful context-removal to completely disable the intelligence.

There are, however, still other means of disabling one's intelligence, some with a long and distinguished history in one's culture. It may be that, far from being confused, one specializes in clarity and in the cautions of clarity. And if that is the case, then the sandpiper is your man. Caution and agility, a mania for shifts of position, a tendency to gather evidence -- toward what? -- a fear of being overwhelmed by wave or horizon....

The roaring alongside he takes for granted,
And that every so often the world is bound to shake.
He runs, he runs to the south, finical, awkward,
In a state of controlled panic, a student of Blake.

The beach hisses like fat. On his left, a sheet
Of interrupting water comes and goes
And glazes over his dark and brittle feet.
He runs, he runs straight through it, watching his toes.

She ascribes some of his characteristics to his study of Blake, but this only shows her ignorance of Blake. It is really Locke he has been reading, with perhaps a bit of Hume (or was it Russell and Moore?). The empiricist bias of Anglo-American culture is here brilliantly satirized in the frenetic evidence-gathering of the sandpiper, whose efforts result in the profound insight that "The millions of grains are black, white, tan, and gray/ mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst." It is a world of discrete particles, items, data bits whose coherence, which can be only the coherence of the immediate glance, is menaced at intervals by wave or breaker or indeed by the horizon itself coming suddenly into view. Yet horizon and view are the things most denied to him; rather, despite his evident focus on detail, "the world is a mist." It may be that the work also satirizes the

blind accumulative impulse of the typical capitalist, especially the smaller scale variety, who, like the sand piper, sometimes ends up with little more than a pile of sand for all his or her efforts. Or else it might be, at a further reach of abstraction, the tendency of Anglo-American academic philosophy of about this time (or even today) which rejected dialectical thinking or indeed any holism at all in favor of a particularist approach modeled on research in natural science (though not on the necessarily synthesizing, and indeed totalizing -- to use a current bugaboo word -- impulse of science's overall project). We can see, therefore, that the poem's satirical intention, or perhaps one might call it its diagnostic intention, extends over a range of cultural and social fields. Yet its objective is to identify a common tendency in all, which is that of a particularizing impulse deprived of larger intention or context, an energy deprived of objective, and a restless searching without rational motive.

The quick darting movement of verse and of observation recede in the next piece, which is built on material taken from Trollope's journal. Here, instead, there is a deliberate and slow pace of observation, as the dismayed British observer writes back home his impressions of Washington. It is not, as they say, a pretty sight:

As far as statues go, so far there's not
 Much choice: they're either Washingtons
 Or Indians, a whitewashed, stubby lot,
 His country's Father or His foster sons.
 The White House in a sad, unhealthy spot
 Just higher than Potomac's swampy brim,
 ---they say the present President has got
 Ague or fever in each backwoods limb.
 On Sunday afternoon I wandered -- rather,
 I floundered -- out alone. The air was raw
 And dark; the marsh half-ice, half-mud....

Dated winter 1861 the piece is a clear instance of the author's return to an allegorizing mode, yet here provided with a careful realism of style, and in addition, the mediation of a dramatic voice, in this case an historical one. Yet the suggestion is fairly clear. The government of Washington, though barely a blip on the radar screen of empire as yet, is nonetheless making progress, in its own crude and backwoods fashion, toward turning itself into a quasi-military dictatorship, an armed camp. The capitol, entirely lacking in amenities and beauty, or dignity of any kind, is yet well-supplied with soldiers. The British government was, of course, a supporter of the Confederacy, and hence of slavery, because of their commercial connections via the cotton trade. We see, then, one imperialist power -- one torture and murder state -- viewing with some alarm, but as yet mostly with disdain, the development of a young and upstart one. Perhaps the slighting reference to Lincoln, a concise and typical piece of British snobbery, is the expression of some anxiety that he might fulfill the more democratic ideals of the earlier American revolutionaries and *philosophes*. But, of course, there was little to worry about; the Emancipation Proclamation was essentially a propaganda move, and if there were time and space we could easily show the Gettysburg Address's seamless consistency on almost every point with typical fascist ideology. It is, of course, one the crucial statements in the historical life of the United States, one of the canonical texts, like the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights, by means of which the political culture attempts to further its ongoing process of self-definition. We are encouraged to view it as the moving expression on the part of an exemplary public figure, Lincoln, which memorializes the incalculable, tragic and yet necessary loss of life in the service of a cause whose absolute worth is thought to be self-evident. This cause was not the

abolition of slavery, or not only that, but rather the preservation of that specter *the Union*. It is a beautiful piece of writing -- grave, humane, and both visionary and subdued, conferring on the anonymous dead the dignity of heroes. How strange, therefore, when on closer examination, we find in its rhetoric and imagery the distinguishing features of fascist rhetoric.

The text presents the Law speaking through its letters, that is, given verbal expression, and relies heavily upon allusiveness for emotional resonance. It begins in a time of myth, and casts the spell of myth, of dream time.

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate -- we can not consecrate -- we can not hallow -- this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth. [6][7]

The ground, which was brought forth by forefathers in a kind of mysterious birth -- the forefathers are not merely politicians but demi-gods; moreover they have the magical power to bring forth, that is, to give birth, as women do -- is now sacred by having absorbed the blood of fallen soldiers.

Power, therefore, inhabits us, already, through an official voice, and it presents itself as calm, familiar, long-established, and as it were, *of old*. Through this sound and its illusion of voice, a voice both grave and impersonal, the Law takes on its own spectral

life. It begins to live in the sound of words, in syntax and diction, and in figures of speech. It lives our death as we die its life, as the dead white and black men at Gettysburg did in fact. And after all this time, they are still dead. By these resonant means it takes on an influential power in the life of the mind: as we listen, we begin to become official Americans. Bishop wants to counter this official voice with an unofficial one in order to enable us to recognize that both are artificial constructions, deliberately contrived by Power for its own ends.

Yet in addition to sound, there is the dimension of image and underlying metaphor. Here we see the use of figures of sacrifice, "gift", and consecration.. The blood, called forth by the Law (in the form of military service) is the vehicle by which the spirit of Law permeates the land itself. A meeting of Law and land brings forth the spectral abstraction of the nation state, nothing more really than those colored shapes in the poem "The Map," but this time they are things quite in earnest and endowed with frightening powers. Thus, the abstract Law here takes on a more concrete manifestation. It becomes a body, the father-or-motherland which drinks the "blood" of its sacrificed sons and, by this means, is consecrated, ratified, and rendered somehow more-than-legitimate, its existence now as much a quasi-religious phantasm as a political reality. It also becomes, since it is a body, a quasi-natural entity. Its activities are thought to have the inevitability of a natural process. Its history thus becomes a destiny which unfolds with the inevitability of a force of nature. We encounter the idea of a "birth" of the new nation "brought forth," and so on. Yet the naturalness, the inevitability of this process, has been called into question by the interruption of the crisis of the war, that is, by the unforeseen, in other words, by history itself. Therefore, the later part of the *Address* must

try to heal this potential rift in the natural and seamless fabric of Destiny by enjoining on its auditors (and readers) a dedicated life (and death), so that the original inevitability can be restored. The entire underlying tension of the Address, therefore, has to do with warding off the intromission of history into an essentially mythical thought structure. These annoying Southerners and these damned Abolitionists are disrupting the calm flow of Empire, begun officially years before under Jefferson with the so-called Louisiana Purchase. We now enjoy the fruits of this process of appropriation at the height of the Pax Americana. Through this myth-creating process the specific and concrete historical realities are erased. A sequence of swindles and genocidal massacres becomes a "founding" and a "westward expansion," to use the most commonly encountered language. In the language of the texts: "...our fathers brought forth upon this continent..." Aside from the echo of a Christian prayer ("Our Father, who art in Heaven..." (the Address also echoes, in varying degrees, The Creed and the Act of Contrition)) there is also a rich mythological confusion in the fact that "fathers" "bring forth." What they bring forth, with all the inevitability of birth itself, is brought forth "on this continent." What is brought forth covers the continent, covering it, as though with clothing, and thus civilizing it. It is an investiture, whose civilizing influence must now be completed, ratified, by being consecrated with the blood of fallen martyrs ("...these honored dead...) in order for the mythical process of nation-state creation to be complete.

As we suggested, Bishop attempts to pour coldwater on all of this, through the dispassionate and distanced voice of an outsider, with his clipped common sense British idiom. It is an historical irony that now this should be a type of language that can in some way show up the lies of empires, now, in 1965, since the empire's center has moved to

the other side of the ocean, and so she makes full use of this and full use of the British voice itself -- calm, unruffled, unimpressed, ironic in that off-hand way, empirical, factual, disdainful though quietly, politely so, going back to one of the sources of this voice, the high-Victorian Trollope, and letting it speak from that source. It is a voice not of sanity (as it would have one think) but of a completely disabused criminality (its sympathy all for the cattle). Yet in its tones, its characteristic structures of feeling, to use Raymond Williams' phrase, it can serve as a corrective antidote, like using one poison to counteract another. Even the fact of putting it into rhyme, a remarkable technical feat, creates a whole mood and ambience so completely at odds with the official voice that would emanate from these events of 1861-65 and resonate down through an entire century, to the current poem's publication, attuning the population's mind to its official version. Here there is a different perspective and a different language for it, a different mind, therefore, and it is as if the poet performs her own demythologizing on this piece of sonorous sleepwalking -- Lincoln's masterpiece, the *Gettysburg Address* -- and its *blut und boden* mythology, by means of a radical shift of cultural perspective and style.

Thus the whole section of the volume is a concise analysis of the north American regime, its culture, its economy, and to some extent its history, or at least its most typical historical obfuscations. The writing is a marvel of coded compression. Yet though these pieces fill out her oeuvre in general, and though they clearly complete the picture of the north American landscape she was painting in the earlier work, we are still left with the that feeling of a gap, a sense of incompleteness in her portrayal of Brazil and especially of its people that I mentioned earlier. And yet perhaps this was part of her intention, foreshadowed in fact even in the volume's early pieces. This would mean that she had

anticipated it all along, and would change our sense of the entire project. To say that it was and seemed to the author herself overshadowed with failure from the first would be an exaggeration no doubt, yet a presentiment perhaps hovers in the writing from the beginning -- of not fitting in, of not being able to accomplish that one crucial feat -- at least according to E.M. Forster -- that of simply connecting.

BRAZIL/ ROUTES OF TRADE AND TRAVEL

The poem "Questions of Travel" includes issues of place, history, and culture in a single work; in it we find the poet attempting to reconcile herself to the foreign in all its forms, and in the process recognizing that this does in fact take various forms and exists across a range of dimensions; it is not only found in a landscape with its scenery -- a profound experience no doubt but at the same time, as the poem makes clear, in some curious way limited -- but also in the cultural and social history of these places, these places which are not merely physical locations on maps, but intersections of geo-political forces, flows -- of people, of knowledge and customs, of money and goods; the entire restless and ceaseless life of humans as a whole which yet never takes any single form but finds out for itself innumerable forms, furthered and hampered by political and economic factors, as the case may be. All of this the poem reflects and takes account of, sometimes directly, sometimes more obliquely, though it is mostly the situation of the traveler that is the focus. Yet why, at bottom, should the splendors of scenery and the like be unsatisfactory after a while? Is it merely the factor of boredom, the boredom we recall

from Goethe's famous remark? This question, the issue of restlessness, and the question of boredom, ultimately, here and perhaps elsewhere as difficult an issue for this poet as it was for Baudelaire, are the poem's opening motivation, the thing that gets it underway. Yet as so often there is humor too, and, in addition, as almost always, the wonder of brilliant description. The description of the falls, in a way, seems to carry forward the landscape description seen in "Cape Breton," though with an increased sense of wildness, and it would be hard to improve on the image of the mountains as barnacled ships. It is a mountain depiction very much in the tradition of the Romantic landscape ode, and one naturally thinks of Wordsworth's Simplicon Pass, Shelley's "Mount Blanc", or even Holderlin's "Der Rhein". The difference is in the uncanny pictorial detail she is able to bring to the subject, so that we do not have to remain content with a relatively vague evocation, combined with emotional enthusiasm conveyed through rhythm and syntax, as is the case with the Romantic examples mentioned. Her more restrained rhythm and normal syntax carry with them these visual images, so that a speaking, as though in conversation, is made the vehicle for what remains, in its wildness and immensity, a sublime object and a startling experience. The sublime is domesticated to speech, while yet remaining sublime. The questions that crowd relentlessly in the next strophe, therefore, do not in any way reduce the impact of the scene and are not intended to. They are questions of motive. Why are we doing this? It is a lot of trouble after all. There is an economics, for one thing, not only the cost of the trip, but, in addition, one has only so many days to live and only so much energy. Why spend them this way? These questions would not occur to the Romantic. The sublime would be its own justification, just as, at an earlier era, no expense would be too great in order to complete the grand cathedral.

What Kant calls a dignity -- that which has an absolute and irreplaceable value -- is implicit in the classical sublime, as likewise in traditional religious sentiments, and therefore one can never raise the issue of justification or utility.

But in the modern period a profound shift has occurred and economic considerations permeate all of existence, not merely because capital itself does, though that is part of it, but also because the resistance to capital has as well. The economic, therefore, lives on both sides of this divide equally and introduces new forms of ethics, thought, and self-management. There is, of course, certainly the question of boredom. Why are we so restless? But this issue, from which two hallways branch, one leading to psychology and the other to religion, has actually only a limited function in the passage as a whole; which, as it negotiates the economic question of how best to spend one's time and the limited energies of one's life, stumbles upon other issues. What is the significance of beauty in itself ? -- the tiniest green hummingbird, the stonework, the folded sunset still quite warm? Are these merely things to be enjoyed, or even, as the last phrase would seem to suggest, consumed? In addition, another ethical concern intrudes -- not one relating to the management of the self but having specifically to do with the tourist industries of neo-colonialism: "Is it right to be watching strangers in a play?" This theme is not really developed, however; it is put aside in favor of a different theme, one that links together the initial impression of the landscape, that subjective response, the issue of boredom, and then the broader question of the relations between cultures (though perhaps not the more specific one of the neo-colonialist practice of tourism).

But surely it would have been a pity
Not to have seen the trees along this road,
Really exaggerated in their beauty,
Not to have seen them gesturing

Like noble pantomimists, robed in pink.
 -- Not to have had to stop for gas and heard
 The sad, two noted, wooden tune
 Of disparate wooden clogs
 Carelessly clacking over
 A grease-stained filling-station floor....
 --- A pity not to have heard
 The other, less primitive music of the fat brown bird
 Who sings above the broken gasoline pump
 In a bamboo church of Jesuit baroque:
 Three towers, five silver crosses....

It is a series of moments, very much in Paterian fashion, for example, or as that might have been updated and revised by, say, Virginia Woolf; yet certainly the “aesthetic” orientation is clear in most of the examples, and they are all instances of the so-called privileged moment. They also harbor a questioning sub-current: what is one hearing, if one notices something as small as “disparate wooden clogs” clacking over the grease stained filling station floor” not making the exact same sound, and notices too, the grease stained floor, and that it *is* a filling station, and further makes a comparison between these clogs and ones that would most likely be found back in that highly regulated place one comes from? In such a case, at such a moment, it is more than just a sound one is noting, or a difference of sound. It is a level of economic development, and perhaps, though not necessarily; a cultural practice -- clogs that sound different or that sound different because they are made in a certain way -- perhaps; or that are made in a certain way because of some underlying economic, infrastructural reason -- perhaps; or one is noting the fact that a filling station attendant wears such things, as opposed to boots -- and is it the attendant? Or is it his wife? And if the latter, is she helping him take care of customers? And if so, what does this say about social customs, the status of women, and the like? Later, she ponders, “blurredly and inconclusively” the relationship

between crude wooden footwear and carefully wrought wooden bird cages. There are, of course, moments of mere enjoyment, as in the concluding “golden silence” after the rain. But often there is more than mere enjoyment, and the passage subtly critiques the merely aesthetic idea of beauty and its privileged moments, whether of Pater, Yeats or indeed Woolf. Instead of enjoyment there is a questioning, a noticing, and an appreciating, but placed in and against a broader and deeper, more resonant, background -- that of asking why? Who? For what reason?

There are, of course, no answers. But they are not so much moments of being, self-sufficient with enjoyment, as they are moments of inquiry, however brief, however incipient. To question is to begin to discover, to begin to learn. And this is the real point of travel, especially for her. It is the reason sunsets do leave us bored after a while, and likewise small green hummingbirds. Discreet marvels tell one nothing in themselves. It is only the whole which speaks, albeit through its particulars. To travel is to learn the ways and means of a new world and to become a different person oneself. One does not need a home, which is why the concluding puzzlement about where on earth it might be is not so dire after all. Homes and families and all the other things that are found there are really not so important, and the reason is they have little to teach, or do so mainly by a kind of earth-bound repetition that the poet seems to have had little ability to make her own. She tries to do so to a degree; the poems about the “open house” are her attempts in that direction. But hers is not a domestic muse at all, and she is, as much as Lawrence or Byron, one of the poets of savage quest, to use Northrop Frye’s wonderful phrase. Significantly, though, she maintains always, within this context, the highest civility in relation to the reader. And yet in a way, this is not surprising; her reason for travel is the

most civilized one possible -- to learn, to learn the world, and yet this necessarily means to witness what is not necessarily civil -- the confluence and conflicts of geo-politics and the economic basis of culture.

We are now in a position to go back to the poem “Brazil” left behind so long ago and pick up the issues of its second and third stanzas.

A blue-white sky, a simple web,
 Backing for feathery detail:
 Brief arcs, a pale-green broken wheel,
 A few palms, swarthy, squat, but delicate;
 And perching there in profile, beaks agape,
 The big symbolic birds keep quiet,
 Each showing only half his puffed and padded,
 Pure-colored or spotted breast.
 Still in the foreground there is Sin:
 Five sooty dragons near some massy rocks.
 The rocks are worked with lichens, gray moonbursts
 Splattered and overlapping,
 Threatened from underneath by moss
 In lovely hell-green flames,
 Attacked above
 By scaling-ladder vines, oblique and neat...

Just so the Christians, hard as nails,
 Tiny as nails, and glinting,
 In creaking armor, came and found it all....

They ripped away into the hanging fabric,
 Each out to catch an Indian for himself –
 Those maddening little women who kept calling,
 Calling to each other (or had the birds waked up?)
 And retreating, always retreating, behind it.

In this the poem’s second stanza we see immediately that we have moved across the threshold of that first stanza’s last two lines and into a different world, or rather it is the same world but seen in a different dimension -- that of artistic representation. By a

skillful slight of hand the poet moves us from actual jungle to painted one almost before we completely realize what has happened. The ambiguity that lingers in the first handful of lines is gone by the time we reach the capitalized and capital abstraction of Sin. We recall that in Steiner's somewhat limited understanding of Benjamin's views, allegory had the effect of rendering substance totally significant. Whatever the limitations of this idea in general, it certainly applies here to this seemingly not very distinguished pictorial version. Here the jungle is quite simply a manifestation of an idea, and the Christians, small and hard as nails, their heads likewise small and hard, can experience it only in those terms laid down in advance by their cultural preconceptions. The abysmal violence that followed from this and from the monstrous greed that pursued its chimera of gold everywhere, and which condemned millions to be worked to death in mines, has been written about by numerous historians, Todorov among them.[8] And yet there is always more and other. Just as, in aesthetic and epistemological terms, one never sees allegory entirely as allegory, entirely as significance, but sees the particularity of the medium as well -- *this* serpent, *these* painted birds, *this* red, *that* black -- so also no jungle, no actual place, will ever be entirely subsumed within a preconceived scheme of understanding. The concrete reality filters through, or indeed, breaks through forcefully, depending on the circumstances. Slowly there is observation. Here, it is, admittedly, of a particular kind; though it would be beyond the scope of the work to be specific, even if one did want to call it rape. And yet the last image, of retreat, is not merely of flight, on the part of these women, but is an image, more broadly, of the elusiveness of the foreign when truly encountered, an elusiveness that cannot be overcome by any degree of violence. Perhaps in the case of the author herself and her own attempts to make contact with the people,

the natives, so to say, of Brazil, of a later time, and even of a much later time, it could not be overcome by anything at all.

CONCLUSION: THE DIGNITY OF WRITING

I

Are we allowed to hope for a better life? In a time of reaction, the utopian impulse is driven deeply underground. Who knows if it can ever rise, and who knows but if it does it will not be met with irony merely or rejected with cynicism and incomprehension. It is important to look at oneself, and to assess one's actions and intentions, trying always to do better; but it is equally important, and in fact indispensable, to assess one's desires and to try to have better ones, better because more enlightened, more humane, and, finally, more substantial, that is to say, more in keeping with the actual nature of the world. Yet what is the actual nature of the world?

It seems to present itself to us as a fundamentally ambiguous experience, demanding, with imperative and traumatic force, responses of all kinds and at all levels

of our nature, yet all the while remaining essentially undefined with respect to its overall nature and value. The poet's work attests to this fundamental experience and in the most fundamental ways: her noted descriptive capacity is her response to the imperative demand of the world -- that it be seen, yet this response is itself accompanied by a noted ambivalence toward what is seen -- this strange place. At first it may be that a metaphysical impulse is concealed within the work, and the place is understood as *the world* in that typical metaphysical sense -- here, below; there above; the here and the beyond. And yet the poet's inspiration, like that of the Byron we have mentioned is marked at a deep level by the awareness of the social and by the fundamental experiences which characterize it -- experiences that are at first only vaguely political or that are so only at a remove. She deals with this social dimension in a coded idiom, one that we have had to interpret by recourse to the tradition of allegory. And yet there is this fundamental difference from the first: that of the social voice, the tones as though of conversation, even if only the conversation the anxious person has with herself. She writes of the world but with the social showing through -- with the two dimensions, metaphysical-existential and socio-political, mingled -- yet she does so with unease, knowing that whatever she says of the one must be affected by what she would have to say of the other. This unease is manifest as a hesitancy, a diffidence, an irony, a humor; as well as by a quick eye for the incongruous, since it is in this experience (incongruity and its amused appreciation) that we acknowledge the divergence of expectation and reality and therefore of mind and world, though we do it in a minor way, and without making too big a fuss. Yet the pull of the social seems to win out at length. For the eye does not show us archetypes or images and shadows of divine things, but rather things themselves, which exist in a place -- do so

now, in the moment of their being seen, and have in the past, a past that we did not witness but can only guess at, though it presses upon the present with an unavoidable power. This seems to be the point to which the author comes, by degrees, and always accompanied by a continual awareness of the limits of her powers of comprehension, if not of description. The experience of ambiguity and of ambivalence would seem to be a fundamental one for her and to be the thing that prompts her efforts at description and comprehension.

This second type of effort -- comprehension -- in particular demands a change in the nature of her writing. Paradoxically this change also brings about a deeper, clearer revelation of the actual -- of nature as such. Desire works through the social, therefore, since she explores the world, and even the physical world, only in relation to social forms, which may be internalized as memory or language. Yet writing is the crucial mediation of this crossing of nature and culture, since writing is the most cultivated use of language (which is itself in part a natural endowment). Both social reality and nature, indeed the body, materiality itself, are grasped only in a process of learning, which in its turn requires the social, a social that is fully present only in the written. The written in question, however, is not mere inscription; it is the evidence of a path of learning, which can only happen to, within, an individual. Writing is thus the encompassing context of experience and learning (of any kind) as well as an evidence of its reality as it has occurred within individuals. In this way, the individual and the *within* are both vindicated; yet not in a triumphalist fashion, for it is the writing which remains the important thing or, rather, the learning, the discovery, of which it is an evidence and, then, for those coming later, a prompting and example.

We submit, therefore, that most poetic oeuvres do not conceal within themselves a single thought, as Heidegger claims, but are rather paths of learning, progressively uncovering with greater depth some few essential insights. Certainly that is the case with this body of work. In her earlier efforts, and at times thereafter, she approaches the ambiguity of substance through the ambiguity of allegory and of mimesis, each leading to the other and then away in a dialectic of direct response followed by the charmed invocation of stricter or looser conventions; by this means the work witnesses the ambiguity inherent in materiality itself -- that it is both oppressive yet nourishing. For it is not true that substance can ever be made entirely significant; a residue of *thisness*, *suchness* must always remain showing through, while likewise it can never be merely literal, but must always place in motion that inherent movement of mind among like and unlike; similarly, this substance --- nothing less than the material world, the body, life itself -- can never be either completely embraced or entirely rejected: it rages as Gnostic evil one moment, yet even at that moment, a moment of consciousness, this very insight is supported by the encompassing elements, in Levinas' sense, which nourish, illumine and provide the indispensable point of departure -- the literal place to stand, the literal light one sees by, the literal flesh one uses to think and to feel: we come to realize that consciousness itself has an elemental quality to it, and that both Cartesian searches for punctuality and certainty and all deconstructive efforts at undermining such, worrying them away from within or making them blur and wilt like tired smoke rings, are equally dependent on this elemental light carried within. Within the circle of this light, the allegorical turns mimetic by degrees, the mimetic allegorical. Is a thing what it is, or is it really another thing, whose ghostly lineaments show through persistent clouds and

choruses of resemblance, which can never be dispelled? Yet the poet persists in her investigation of the world by means of the eye, despite the continued bafflement of the eye, even in its victory and in its splendor.

Her search reveals not merely items but dimensions. Here we see in miniature the encompassing realism eventually achieved, and hence the beginning of a greater freedom for the mind, a greater comprehension. It is with intelligence as it is with light: both flood a space immediately as soon as obstructions are removed; therefore this comprehension is dawning imperiously from the outset of her work, and is always on the verge of arriving, though of course it never can arrive. This fact of its being ever just about to be, and yet never quite, is the condition for writing as such and for its being a process of learning -- perhaps an excruciating process. Yet the edge of enlightenment is pushed forward by small steps, although there is still the oppression of sense in the materiality of language, in sensation, and in the materiality of the body; there is still the evil, the exasperation, and yet the eternal lure of Being, understood as perception, presence, immediate experience, and thus also as potential beauty and significance. By means of this ambiguity and this ambivalence, she achieves as well a distance from the catastrophes of politics. Yet in bourgeois fashion, as a means of redeeming this realm, the world itself, little can be offered beyond the vague utopian promise which does nonetheless glow within the lustrous night of the man-moth's pupil and indeed within every image. This ambiguity and its persistence, prompts an irony of a certain kind: it takes many external forms but is rooted in sentiments something like the following: *Do I dare to say what I really want?* And further, *Do I dare to say it is what all need and what all want? If I seem to say it, I must unsay it too, mustn't I?* This self-reflection -- it does not deserve the name, though

it frequently receives it -- is too little since it is essentially undialectical, and yet too much, since it is equally unaesthetic, or, rather, tends to release impulses that are. Yet it is a very common impulse in contemporary American writing and is sometimes thought to constitute an, as it were, *meta* dimension within the writing -- one derived from, ultimately, we must note, the very ambiguity of substance itself, the fact that it -- life, the world, the body -- are both loved and reviled as good and evil at once. This means that one is a compassionate humanist at the office but a Gnostic on weekends. There is no limit to the morally grotesque circumstances that both writing and living may be subject to as the result of this conflict. Yet as the sophisticates themselves confess, a skepticism too results. What is the use of beauty, or more pointedly, is there such a thing? *Should* there be? Has this not been the subject of any number of "advanced" discussions? (We may call them that out of courtesy.) Still, we must note that one cannot have skepticism with regard to one's desires. One can about their possible outcome in the world, but that is a separate issue; indeed *this* skepticism -- very cheap -- is also very common. It tends to produce reactionary comments and does so even in the author herself. They are always along the lines of "That's the way the world is," "It's human nature," or, as my grandmother used to say, "That's the way it goes." (It is self-evident to these people that all wisdom is summed up in these mere phrases):

Lullaby for the Cat

Minnow, go to sleep and dream,
 Close your great big eyes
 Round your head Events prepare
 The pleasantest surprise.

Darling Minnow, drop that frown,
 Just cooperate,
 Not a kitten shall be drowned

In the Marxist State.

Joy and Love will both be Yours truly,
 Minnow, don't be glum.
 Happy days are coming soon –
 Sleep, and let them come. [204]

Yet a strict realism requires one to admit that one believes in one's desire the way one believes in one's existence. Rather, one experiences it that way and as that -- it *is* one's existence. Nonetheless something troubles us. If it is not skepticism, then what is it? Is it true that one wishes for a libidinal economy less distorted by the spurious desires we are encouraged to have in a culture of consumption, advertising, and corporate indoctrination? But desires, too, are a species of learning, this is one of the lessons of Plato; and once one has a certain type of desire, one cannot go back and unlearn: this is the lesson of the drug addict. The corporate sponsored regime consists of inducing the more negative of these, plus distractions, as well as fears and resentments. What, therefore, can make our desires not more realistic but in fact more real (more real in the sense of connecting to things beyond the individual nervous system -- to social good and to historical context)?

Before we can answer this, we must observe that there is a power and a problem, that of the image itself. So many aspects of our mental life are expressed in images. An image is a powerful, perhaps a bewitching thing, in some ways almost too much so, and we are haunted by images, not merely in our media -- which, contrary to much pseudo-analysis is a superficial thing of little account and less real effect -- but in our most basic culture and in fact in our dreams and day dreams. And these things begin to blur into each other. Experience, dominated by the eye and the mind's eye, and finally by the internal cinema of each -- the private film each is always making of daily life -- is lived in the body and in the simultaneous tensions of hope and fear. Desire, never sleeping, follows

this dialectic closely and supplies the lack of conceptual tools, of clear understanding -- for we are always in a state of ignorance -- with images and more images. We witness the birth of portents, the sense of presentiment, and the study of signs; superstition of all kinds flourishes, a manifold phenomenon hardly confined to the most widely acknowledged forms-- astrology, Tarot, and the like -- but taking many others as well and infecting political life in particular. Yet could humanity exist without such things? Not that they have any validity, but here the power of a desire we might even yet call utopian reaches outward into the furniture of the world, into the events of time and space, to set a special significance within them drawn from the perennial store of archetypes into which it attempts to enter with the combined power of life itself and the dreams that animate it.

Even sight -- the most empirical and scientifically useful of the senses --implies the liminal contingency and exposure of visibility and yet enacts a transcendence of it: for the seeing eye inhabits that same liminal space as the object seen -- the borderline with nothing, the imminence of danger, destruction, death, yet though it experiences that same contingency and exposure, it enjoys a sort of triumph over it -- luminous and illusory -- in a reflection that is also in its own way always dialectical, in that there is an inherent contestation of the object and with the object: a contestation of the object with others in the social act of description and re-description and a contestation with the object itself in the errands of mere survival -- moving among things, handling them, working with and through them. It is striking that our very activity of mind and body generates illusions (in the form of these images) even as it also generates knowledge and insight (this is a point not really seen by Heidegger). Yet there are times -- perhaps they should be considered inspiration -- when the eye's mind, stunned not so much by the things it sees as by the

ideological constructions that have been placed upon them, sees otherwise, discerns a kind of dark fire set within the very objects of the social world, casting a just-perceptible aura around them, the spectral shapes of misprision and false consciousness or even of paranoia, so that the eye takes in both too little and too much; dazzled, it sees less and less accurately than it might, yet is incited to a hectic vigilance nonetheless, and what it sees it rather seizes in a fierce interrogation which yet remains sterile. Is this not, for all its potential for the delusory, a necessary phase? What would the alternative be? Would it not be a kind of reductive anti-culture? It is significant that, unlike many American writers, Bishop does not attempt to purge the image, to restrict it or to dilute it; though a product of North American Protestant culture, she is not drawn to the shibboleth of “spare and plain”, the idea that a poem should be “tight” (curious expression that), and is not enrolled in the culture of circumcision, according to which all adornments must be shorn, since they are seen as polluting. Rather the opposite is the case: with hypnotic persistence she sees into the life of the world, the body, nature, society -- her gaze lured on by striking images which feed her art almost more so than any other English-speaking poet. This constant renewal through the eye is the source of her perennial youthfulness, sometimes viewed, by the unthinking, as “charm”, or even dismissed as “naivete”. Yet as a result, to read her is to be drawn through the image and its subliminal appeal into something beyond -- the context of society and of history itself. In her inspiration’s very flight toward the visionary realm of desire fulfilled, of a kind both utopian and innocent, which it can never reach, it yields, as though in passing, society and history in themselves and in their truth.

As one might expect, and as we have already indicated, this does not imply a social management of expression, a leveling down: on the contrary, she is more daring than anyone. In fact, the painful awareness of the ambiguity of substance and the attendant ambiguity expressed in the dialectic of allegory/mimesis yields to a deeper utopian spirit than is possible through the image merely, when taken in its photographic simplicity (an understanding that does tend to dominate American aesthetics). In astoundingly Marxist fashion this non-Marxist, this petit-bourgeois princess floating in the rowboat of her small annuity discovers the spirit of utopia through history and the inclusive understanding of the human situation possible only by this means, this dialectic.

Insofar as she views herself in the larger context of history, an element of attempted self-placement enters her writing, culminating in such major efforts as “Cape Breton,” “At the Fishhouses,” and, in its own way “Manuelzhino”. It becomes particularly clear in the late poems, say especially in “The Waiting Room”:

I said to myself: three days
 And you'll be seven years old.
 I was saying it to stop
 The sensation of falling off
 The round, turning world
 Into cold blue-black space.
 But I felt: you are an *I*,
 You are an *Elizabeth*,
 You are one of *them*.
 Why should you be one, too?
 I scarcely dared to look
 To see what it was I was.
 I gave a sidelong glance
 --- I couldn't look any higher ---
 At shadowy gray knees,
 Trousers and skirts and boots
 And different pairs of hands
 Lying under the lamps.

I knew that nothing stranger
 Had ever happened, that nothing
 Stranger could ever happen.
 Why should I be my aunt,
 Or me, or anyone?
 What similarities ---
 Boots, hands, the family voice
 I felt in my throat, or even
 The National Geographic
 And those awful hanging breasts ---
 Held us all together
 Or made us all just one?
 How -- I didn't know any
 Word for it – how “unlikely”...
 How had I come to be here,
 Like them, and overhear
 A cry of pain that could have
 Got loud and worse but hadn't?

A utopian desire is still present even in an irony directed at one's efforts at comprehension, in foreknowledge of their partial defeat. This irony, seen especially in “The Man-Moth” but flickering continually throughout her work, is the implicit acknowledgement, by tonal means, of one's own finitude, but it is not directed against effort itself. It is not, therefore, a cynical and reflexive irony, common in post-war writing, but rather part of an attempt at a more complete self-description. It fills out and renders three dimensional the original outsider/observer stance the author had adopted. In implicit acknowledgement, too, of one's own essential sociality, this then moves into a more socially involved phase in the great poems about Brazil, which are like a rediscovery of the world as such.

Yet other people do not seem to yield to discovery quite so easily, and here there is a partial failure. And so there is a movement backward to consider the society from which one has come. If one considers one's origins it is natural also to consider one's end,

and yet this is perhaps impossible. One must be content instead with a consideration of one's solitude. This gives rise to some of her final pieces, in which an essential isolation dominates the writing. Perhaps even the "angelic" position of the alien observer, who considers the world but is not part of it, returns too at this point.

No foot could endure it,
shoes are too thin.
broken glass, broken bottles,
heaps of them burn.

Over those fires
no one could walk,
those flaring acids
and variegated bloods.

As with "Varick Street" the anti-capitalist satire is direct and clear, coming to her writing with a seeming effortlessness in certain contexts. With "Varick Street," though, we were at ground level, and there is a relationship (of some sort) to some one else mentioned in the refrain, and therefore an implied social context and connection. Here the speaker, above the world and merely looking at it, seems quite alone, alone with her eye, as it were, which sees and sees.

Diaphanous lymph,
bright turgid blood
spatter outward
in clots of gold

To where run, molten,
in the dark environs
green and luminous
silicate rivers.

A pool of bitumen
one tycoon
wept by himself,
a blackened moon.

Even at this point there is still the conversational tone, as though speaking to another. (Though it is perhaps menaced by the unusual brilliance of description, as well the intensity of the anti-capitalist satire). Here we find the answer to the question of what can redeem desire. Though frustrated in its effort to seize the world and to enjoy it, or at least to know it, it nonetheless continues to see and to describe. Here description itself, reaching a height of visual intensity despite the general darkness, reaches out to capture some beauty in some way and to convey it to others by this means: the social function of description is revealed here as the way in which the isolated self, frustrated and in fact doomed, passes on to others some evidence of its most concrete life -- looking, seeing this place the world. Because the others are implicitly addressed, their situation, their political situation, is acknowledged, as well as the objects themselves, the world itself in its literal presence. Metaphysical and social overlap once again, yet now one is aware more of their convergence in a single impulse rather than their divergence as a result of competing impulses -- to convey a knowledge of the world versus conveying knowledge of society. This single impulse that dominates here is that of the ultimate exploration of one's own solitude, which yet requires both the objects of the world and others to be fully experienced. The experience of this solitude (and of the death that waits within it) dominates these late poems and becomes overwhelming, yet it does not close off the experience either of the objects of nature or of others. To the contrary, one's failure and frustration create a mood of candor and make possible a directness of expression, and one's continuing desire opens its eye still wider and seeks to pass on its experience. Here we see the factors that redeem desire: first, that it not quit or renounce itself nor even particularly weaken over time; resignation is the first sign and entrance of corruption, and

to avoid it is itself a major achievement. Secondly, it must be the vehicle for a continuing perception and not merely for various types of enjoyment or consumption. And third, it must acknowledge the presence of the others and address them too in some way.

Yet there had been all along a principle we have chosen not to discuss, that of the person, the voice. These last observations above bring us to it now. It intrudes itself on our attention more strongly at exactly this point, though in reality it had been with us from the first, echoing in our mind. It is a principle of continuity through her work, even though this work is composed almost entirely of breakthroughs, coming always as they must in unexpected form or at unexpected places in the oeuvre. This principle I speak of is that of speaking itself -- the principle, the dimension, of voice. This term is over used these days. But here it can perhaps find an appropriate place and be given a clear meaning.

The dignity of writing is in part the dignity of speaking, yet it is not a speaking in the usual sense, in a face to face relation; that is to say, it is not a transient divulging nor a mere reporting. It is instead a considered utterance or rather an evidence of a process of discovery, in this case of self-discovery and assessment, and though it is a writing it yet is not in codes, but avails itself of some of the directness and clarity of the spoken word which is used then to mark down the dynamics and punctuality of perception and thought. This spokenness and this noting are both part of the civility of this voice, which yet, paradoxically, constitutes a *meta* moment in which one places oneself before the reader, on the plane of history. This implies a reflection on my position in that history. This is part of the tension of mimesis/allegory raised to a new power. For what is this conflict and dialectic when focused upon oneself? I am not a soul,

still less a proper name. These would be the allegorical ways of looking at myself traditionally Christian. Nor am I an object of description, a view provided by natural science, as well as every pseudo-science from behaviorism to Lacanism, but also indulged in catastrophically by classical pseudo-scientific Marxism. The ultimate conflict of allegory and description comes to a head in the effort of metaphysical historical self-placement which is implied in the act of writing for the others, for history. How to avoid these ways of being trivial? Yet the trial is a conflict between the powers of abstraction and typification, allegory and the caressing eye of the painter which is not a lens, as these are involved in an historical search through the world and through themselves and their own histories. This is to transcend oneself as a mere person, but a transcending through a process of learning, which moves continually toward this *meta* moment of self-placement and self-assessment of the mind's capacities for self-understanding.

To be subject to this process is to be subject to a trauma as specific as it is obscure and as precise as it is vast. Can the tone and impress that it leaves within one's consciousness and character be preserved and communicated to the reader? It has no figure that corresponds to it. It is no metaphor, even though we need metaphors to characterize it. It can be conveyed by no image, for it moves within, amongst, between and around images, which it animates and modifies or mutes, though yet it is not one of them nor part of the order they comprise; it is rather another thing: the presence within writing, perceptible but not describable, permeating, encompassing rather than punctual, of a person, and thus of a history, of a particular history, reduced now, not by death merely nor even by time, but by a process of human historicity that includes these but includes also discovery, dawning insight, its intermittent obscuring and then at last the

final form of knowledge, the second life of fire whose flame, now so thin that it no longer can be seen, is heard as a pure timbre and not a melody, a thing that is part of the saying perhaps and not really part of the said, though yet it remains, even in its refinement and near secrecy, still a social virtue as well as a literary one per se, implying in its very imperiled existence the imperiled idea of civility itself. Is it plausible that civility, the civil, can be defined, redefined, in this way: to transcend oneself as a mere person in a process that is a learning as well as an historical self-placement and assessment? Is this the civil for our time? And if it is imperiled, is it so by the culture of our time and by the Gnosticisms that flood into it as though through the very gates of the irrational?

Though not an image, this voice, this tone, this accent is also the vibration of a fundamental ambivalence and a fundamental ambiguity; it suggests the deeper and deeper entrance into this ambiguity, and the possession of it and by it. For the ambiguity of representation consists in an ongoing conflict of two powers resident in the mind -- what we have called allegory on the one hand and mimesis on the other. This ambiguity is connected to the primordial ambiguity of substance itself -- that it is both oppressive yet nourishing. Mimesis is a symptom, an indication of a desire to draw near and to embrace; allegory an indication of aversion, or of a desire to transcend. This is the perennial ambivalence at the heart of writing, though it is there only because it is first at the heart of human existence. The dignity of writing is seen, further, in writing's power to encode, in a definitive way, this ambiguity of substance through varying styles of description and this ambivalence through intellectual comprehension expressed as tone. It consists, further, in the fact that writing embodies the chiasmus of nature and sociality, nature and culture, and remains always an affair of both impulse and convention. Hence its issuing

from and encoding of the entire range of human mentality, as this mentality is seized by, riven by, the ambivalence and conflict we have described (or allegorized (which?)).

Finally it consists in the fact that in the work of a significant author, writing is the evidence of a process of learning -- it is inscription, yes, but not of empty signs merely, which attain a semblance of meaning purely by means of their diacritical distinctions; rather, it is the manifold sign of this embodied comprehension, this ambivalence itself. Indeed the birth of writing must have witnessed a crisis of awareness and of culture through a heightening of this ambivalence; writing is inconceivable without it. It impresses itself upon us as the evidence of a path of experiencing, questioning, learning, suffering. This implies, at the farthest reach of learning, the farthest reach likewise of experience, which is historical experience, of questioning, which is likewise historical questioning; and this impels the writer, necessarily an individual, to historical self-placement, which can only be expressed in the act of writing for others. In this act is perceived sharply the conflict between allegory and mimesis, typification and description, summary and detailed analysis, justice and mercy. At the same time it is a finite and particular creature that undergoes this process, a creature whose existence is darkened and troubled by the imperative to write. What is the way to address oneself to the others whom one *must* address, if this is one's situation? Neo-classical ideas of decorum are an attempt, ultimately, to manage this problem, perhaps the deepest problem for the writer, and the most difficult question, once the technical matters of representation have been decided. There are many solutions; the classical solution is to remain a person speaking to other persons, moving neither above them nor below them on the chain of being. But it may be that this is hard for the modern writer, since so many impulses in modern

culture encourage both descent or ascent, as the case may be. Yet here, in “Night Plane” even when literally aloft she yet remains grounded in an awareness of limitation, fragility, trouble, and exiguous hope. These are the constituents, in this instance, of her civilized and humane voice; in other cases it has other implications and other suggestions, yet it is always the sign of a particular kind of humility -- since however brilliant writing may become, it is never anything else than the words of one individual, one finite person, undergoing discovery, transformation, wonder and trauma.

II

Does the allegorical, through its arbitrary aspect, place a punctuality within the process of continuous semiosis as description such that the conflict between genesis and iconic validity is temporarily stilled and an iconic stability insured? (Even though it is one in which we do not believe. (And would this be a way of understanding the idea of the supreme fiction?)) Would we then have to say that the conflict between genesis and validity is the essential modern problem? If so, then allegory is not a multiplication of significance -- however strange, or strained, still less the divulging of a secret; it is rather a limitation (like the very idea of spirit itself, which it tends to serve). This limitation may take the apparent form, may appear indeed to reinforce, against all empiricism, and to suggest, against all modernity, the idea of a profound dualism cleaving the world to its heart, such that an abyss opens and we see returning something bordering on a Gnosticism. And yet, which is more startling? -- the Gnostic who understands himself as

a name, not replaceable by a total description, or the Sophisticate who, forgetting about description entirely -- relegating it to an earlier stage of culture, as it were -- also relegates the name, all names, and indeed his or her very own to that same stage? An extremist in an exercise, he moves beyond it, forgets it, and thus walks out of the world and out of his life entirely. But walks then into what? The icons of allegory must always be *thises, that's* -- certainly not the heacceties of Scotus, and yet specific things (that scarlet letter thing, for example) which yet reveal themselves to be nothing, really, like the marvelous dream one has in which one smiles and laughs, but of which one can remember almost nothing upon waking. (The micrology of description is this waking.) Likewise, are not names also specific, even singular despite their evident emptiness? The fate of allegory and the fate of names is thus strangely parallel: reduced to neither tokens nor types (and in this they contrast with everything else in the neo-capitalist order) they pile up as *furniture*. This would appear to have been Benjamin's point of departure, this simultaneous hypertrophy of the nominally real (History, Man, Woman, Language, etc) combined with an attendant (and evidently long-foreseen) corrosion of emblems. Yet why this corrosion? Is it not because allegory, in his special sense, appears only when the mere emblems that compose it begin to exhibit a special distortion, which comes not from the passage of time, but rather from the tidal waves of blood that wash over them, of slaughter, indeed of torture, all of these placed in motion -- their whirlwind motion out of which come so many tormented voices -- at behest of Usura? This would suggest that the theme of time was a smokescreen all along, though by the time one recognizes this, one is intended to be too old and feeble -- in some sense -- to do anything about it, or to want to

(the hidden theme of Eliot's "Gerontion"). The real theme was always instead the one familiar from Hegel -- historical violence, the slaughter bench of history.

Benjamin announces this point -- the violence of history, and its relevance here -- with a curious simplicity, yet he perhaps did so unwittingly. Thus: the early Romantics were wrong; there is no elective affinity of symbol with nature; there is gnosis instead with its perversely intricate constructivism. Departing from natural couplings, it prefers all sorts of odd positions and curious implements and regalia. Yet Benjamin is mistaken: his assumption is that this anti-nature of perversely animated emblems is itself productive (de Man assumed that it was non-productive, though in a way obsessive, a theme -- obsession -- that links him strangely with Levinas). Yet its repertoire of conventional motifs is nothing more than that -- a repertoire (productivity and non-productivity are alike concepts that are inapplicable to it). It must always be seen as having been removed from a continuum -- as still poses from a moving body, the continuum -- the body -- being perception itself. The Romantics were perhaps not so dumb after all. And a moving body -- though lacking any single name, precisely because of its motion -- can yet be described (the micrology of description returns, invoked, needed, though it may be a little out of practice). It is described -- rendered, to use Henry James' term -- not by a constructivism, however seemingly naturalized, not even by the dialectic itself, and especially not by that (nor, if we happen to find ourselves marooned by some chance on that dark side of the Atlantic, as on the moon, by any of the pseudo-problems which are intended to be plastic stand-ins for this in the land of the free -- thus, *pentameter versus... something, new figuration versus... something, new historicist versus... something, feminism versus...everything, bla bla bla...a kind of toy dialectic*

for pre-Marxist children) but by perception in a continuous questioning of the world, the being in the interrogative mode of Merleau-Ponty. We are returned once again to description, yet now it must in fact be a description of the social and political, as well as ferns and flowers. The defeated Gnostic allegorist turned describer must now, finally, turn witness.

III

Was the ambiguity of substance mentioned earlier asserted too hastily? Perhaps the problem was really always a quarrel with an *external* and in a sense formal entity (God, the State, the Party) rather than with an internal and actual condition or continuum (substance, life, the body). For the Party is evil too, and our fearless leader likewise. These involve lesser degrees of dissent (something short of a Gnosticism) and yet still involve danger, or may at times. And this is really where our main problems as humans lie, for it is always in society that we exist after all. Perhaps this is our lesser sociality; learning and writing being together the greater. Allegory is, therefore, also a means of expression of sorts, and a means of dealing with a social situation: deliberately coded thoughts are expressed, but hidden; they appear, but are invisible. It is true, as Benjamin points out, that a degree of expertise is presupposed, so that the idea of the esoteric develops or rather never dies out, however much culture may change, and this in itself becomes a lesser culture, to go with the lesser sociality, the one tending toward oppression, the other toward superstition. Culture -- or at least some forms of it --

therefore reveals in itself a natural bias toward reaction; it is always necessary for learning, yet curiously in conflict with it as well.

We certainly see this more purely social tendency in the author as well as the more metaphysical impulse we have sketched. Yet something else is there too in the forgetting of both name and description, description and name. We will refrain from calling this nihilism, and it is certainly not the sublime. Call it rather the second life of fire, the one Benjamin could not foresee. To dispense with description, the micrology of perception, with the iconic stock figures of thought, and with the cultural talismans of names is to do what? Whatever it is, one can only do it to oneself. And so some of the last pieces are solitary, even more than the early ones which, though they are empty, yet anticipate a world. Here there is no future. It is this that is given up.

Allegory therefore is a braking device in a three way contest between the name, the typical icon, and the micrology of description. Of these, the name is the most dispensable and the one that, contrary to traditional stories, the poet is always very able to do without. Cleverness is called for and responds to the call. But this is the exact problem. The resulting constructions never lose the aura of the arbitrary, the merely willed. As things merely willed they tend toward the inherently reactionary. Indeed, there can be no such thing as esoteric meanings or secret meanings. The world is open to perception, to consciousness, yet this must be enlarged in stages through teaching and learning, which require names yet not as the main thing, rather as starting points. Her writing is an instance. She teaches herself the way to see the world in part through an interrogation of basic nouns -- land, water, self, world. The process is from homemade surrealism put

together out of bits of Coleridge and Walter de la Mare to something exceeding the most advanced Marxist poetics (exceeding them because more imaginative while being also just as profoundly dialectically materialist). And yet, and because of her example, we can see all the more clearly the rationality that is compatible with inspiration and with beauty. We see more clearly too that all supposed forms of esoteric teaching are worthless -- there can be no skepticism, no deconstruction. Likewise irrelevant are all other bourgeois ideas of innovation. There is no value in making it new, though that inevitably will happen. One must instead make it real.

IV

Reaction, however, can take many forms; not merely these obvious ones; it is not necessarily the self-emasculation of the intellect and imagination satirized by Byron in the dedicatory stanzas of *Don Juan*, in which the Lake Poets are seen as having sold out, and the former radicals now compose themselves into a pie to set before the King or Regent. Yet there is another story. Reaction is also the defensive reaction of the essentially isolated individual. This power of private reaction becomes increasingly important politically as society grows more atomized, more and more composed of essentially isolated individuals with ever more tenuous connections to each other and fewer structures to reduce either their inherent isolation or their necessarily competitive relations in the context of a political economy defined entirely in neo-capitalist terms. (Actually, to be sure, society itself does not necessarily go this way, but intellectuals and artist-writer types in their grubby little careers do tend to.) In such a context the

individual is alone, thrown back entirely upon himself or herself, looking anxiously about lest their little advantages be lost to some competitor or their disadvantages, concealed from others with anxiety, be discovered; their medium is secrecy, calculation, fretful labor, smug self-assurance if they feel themselves ahead, consuming resentment if they do not, punctuated in either case by hedonist binges, and withdrawal from significant association as being not worth the trouble. The moral tone of existence grows, by degrees, close to that of the true barbarism touched upon earlier -- *schadenfreude* becomes ever more common and one witnesses people viewing others' misfortunes -- an illness, an accident -- with smiles and laughter. This barbarism develops slowly in the academic world as well as in the political, so that it is recognized mostly after the fact as a *fait accompli*, a done deal, a that's the way it is; but in reality it had been growing apace within the settled consciousness, the self-awareness, the self-ratifying habits and enjoyments of the anonymous middle classes all along, not least in their educated sectors. Age is a sort of curdling or coagulation of the entire person, physically, mentally, emotionally; a lack of resource and of discrimination palsies the ability to comprehend, to feel, and to act. There is no such thing as slave morality, but there is very much senescent morality -- sometimes called prudence, shrewdness or the immortal wisdom of indifference; with age comes indifference.

And yet it cannot be as simple as this. There is always the awareness of right and wrong, however muted it might be; there is always the inherent pull away from what compromises, the recoil from what pollutes. Yet art creates a singularity by means of responding to the singularity of the real. Its substance is not its formal medium -- still less supposed innovations in such -- but perception itself and thought in its questioning, as

these give rise to each other. The genius and candor of this particular writer sees this clearly and early; she may be faulted for writing little, but each piece represents a step in an exhaustive examination, entirely searching and radical, of the means of representation, not as a way of reflecting on representation itself, its process of facture and the like -- that is, of placing unmade choices on display; she publishes no notebooks, only completed works, each of which has worked through the dimensional continuities of that section of historical and social reality to which it answers. She does all of this without pretentious gratuitous gestures and seeks only the actual, the truth. Like an alien visitor, she reflects on the fundamental nature of the world as seen in its revealed moment and in its dialectical obscurity: she begins by dropping the plum lines of irony through the fabled gap -- the terrible abyss that is said to yawn between representation and the real. Yet quickly she begins to see that language does in fact represent the world, and that the world is in fact knowable. Because of her brilliant descriptions, she seemed familiar and homely, perhaps even amusing., and so the radical nature of her project is not at first understood. Though she is one of the most profoundly dissident of American writers, this remains unnoted, though it is all quite clear. By a very natural process, the process of intelligence itself as it discovers the world, she moves away from fancy and coded dissent toward an encompassing realism, which yet can still be daring because of its direct basis in perception. Yet this more than dialectical process must lead one into the dimension of the social, which is more than just a dimension but is instead a complex of ethical imperatives, responsibilities, of unfreedom in the context of freedom; at the height of one's freedom in the form of mastery (the highest privilege and accomplishment of the social) one is stricken with the unfreedom of the needed response. Only the informed

adult can experience this and then in his or her whole person. One could say that he or she must die and many have, and yet this statement would be wrong. Instead one must work; to respond is to exert oneself. Exertion is needed, not suffering. The exertion is so great that it requires the reforming of one's whole person, represented in "The Man-Moth" as squeezing oneself from a tube onto the light. Later this is represented more adequately and fully, though less amusingly, in the self-questioning of "Questions of Travel," in the profound respect and silence of "Twelfth Morning," in the profound comedy and pathos of "Manuelzinho," in the holistic and communal visions of "The Riverman." These are the evidence that the author was outgrowing the merely local and ironic and mannered, the very realm of "style" with all of its interesting choices, and was discovering the universal, the communal, the historical, the real -- all poems of the poor, all poems of the time to come and of the people to come.

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